Pretty when you cry | Park Gyu-Jin/Kang Seong-Jun

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by Yaoieugenics

Summary

They didn’t know how it started.
It just did.

From bruised ribs and jealous outbursts, bloody noses and tears streaking red skin—
to those same bruises being patched up by the boy who made them, whispers that he’d never leave, no matter how many more came.

That feeling like you’d die if either of them walked away.

And then it always circled back again—running in loops from bloody fists to warm baths, from pain to comfort, from breaking apart to clinging tighter.

Gyujin and Seongjun were trapped in their own chaos, a cage built out of fights and need… and the truth was, neither of them wanted that cage to break.

[ON HIATUS]

Notes

This is my first fic here and English is not my first language so bare with me lmfao there werent any fics on this beautiful ship so i will do the honors. ALSO pls read tags thx

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: A silent game

Korea—once gun-free, now drowning in a surge of violence it can no longer ignore. News anchors spoke with urgency, headlines blaring about a nation on edge. The government remained undecided, teetering on the edge of legalizing firearms.

The screen flickered black.

Gyu Jin blinked, drawn back to the warmth of the room as the soft click of the remote silenced the chaos. His mother stood there, gently brushing his ink-black hair out of his eyes, her touch featherlight—like she was afraid he might break.

“Gyu jin-ah,” she murmured, voice like chamomile tea, “don’t pay attention to this kind of stuff, hmm?”

Her smile was like a small fireplace in winter—tired but glowing, just enough to keep the cold out. She pointed subtly to her old vintage watch, the worn leather strap hanging loose around her wrist.

Gyu Jin stood with an awkward stiffness, like his joints were learning how to move for the first time. He shuffled to the door, bowing his head low in respect. His smile was small, quiet—but real.

“Ah… yes. I’ll head for school now.”

She looked at him with a gaze so tender it could fold galaxies—like she was staring straight into the center of who he was, and loving every inch of it.

“See you later, Mom.”

The school hallways were overflowing—voices too loud, footsteps too many. Clusters of students clogged the path, cliques too thick to pass through. The louder they laughed, the more isolated Gyu Jin felt.

Inside the nearly empty classroom, just two students focused on early study while Gyu Jin sat hunched at his desk like he was trying to disappear. He wasn’t hiding from the hallway noise—he was hiding from *someone*.

His arms formed a makeshift pillow as he folded into himself, breath slow, lashes fluttering as sleep crept up on him. Sleep had been a stranger to him lately. His ribs throbbed beneath his shirt with deep bruises in secret places—a constant reminder that roaming the hall meant offering yourself up as target practice.

But rest was a fantasy.

His head jerked back violently—his scalp burned with the sudden pull. A small gasp escaped him before he could stop it.

“Yah. Fuck-Gyu. Were you sleeping?”

A ripple of cruel laughter followed. Four shadows surrounded his desk like hyenas circling an injured fawn.

And that pack’s leader, the one yanking his hair out of his skull: Seong Jun.

Gyu Jin opened his mouth, lips parting, to say something, say anything—but nothing came out. What could he say that wouldn’t make it worse? Nothing he could say would satisfy them enough for him not to be a target of practice any less—so he just stayed silent.

Seong Jun scoffed and moved his grip from Gyu Jin’s hair to his face, gripping it so tightly his nails left indents on his skin. He crouched, locking eyes with him—face to face, predator to prey. Gyu Jin instinctively jerked back, but the tight grasp on his face kept him in place.

The room felt colder now.

“You answer when I ask you something.”

Gyu Jin’s jaw quivered in his grasp. The tremor was small, nearly invisible—but not to Seong Jun. No, he noticed *everything*. He released his face with a cocky smirk and watched Gyu Jin recoil, rubbing at the ghost of his touch like he could scrub the shame away.

“…Sorry,” Gyu Jin mumbled, eyes downcast, voice threadbare.

Seong Jun’s smirk grew into something darker. His posture was relaxed, hands in pockets, but his gaze glinted with something venomous.

“See? That wasn’t so hard. It breaks my heart when you ignore me. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Gyu Jin whispered something unintelligible—barely audible.

A sharp kick to his chair snapped him forward.

“Ah—yes.”

His voice sounded like it came from a rabbit with its throat halfway caught in a trap.

Laughter again.

Seong Jun strolled around the desk, finger tracing the edge like he was choosing how to dismantle it.

“And friends help each other, right?”

He stopped in front of Gyu Jin, gave one final tap on the desk.

“Come to karaoke with your mom’s ID. 19:00.”

Gyu Jin’s lips parted, heart pounding in protest—but he nodded. Of course he did.

A slap—light, but humiliating—landed on his cheek.

“See you later, Fuck-Gyu.”

“Fucking asshole.”
“My mom… she works so hard, I can’t—I really can’t—”
“They’ll use her ID for loan sharks—fuck—”
“I’ll get hit again, even if I bring it.”

Gyu Jin paced his room like a trapped animal. Fingers tugged at his hair as his voice unraveled with panic. His bones ached, but his chest ached worse—*like something bigger was tearing him in half*.

“Seriously. What the fuck did I do to deserve—”

Then—buzz.
The screen lit up.
[Unknown Number]

Fuck-Gyu, we’re all waiting. I told you not to ignore me, or should we come to your mom’s shop? What does she do again? Bakery? Meat seller? – 18:50

Seong Jun. Gyu Jin hadn’t even saved his number, but he knew it was him.

Fuck.

Terror bloomed in his stomach like acid.

Downstairs, his mother greeted him with her usual warm smile—naïve and trusting. When he asked for 50,000 won, she handed him her wallet without question.

“One day I’ll make enough for you to have your own card, filled with money. You won’t even need me anymore. Take more if you want, baby.”

Gyu Jin’s mom was glancing up at him with guilty eyes that she couldn’t provide more for him, and even through those guilty eyes she still managed to work up a smile towards her son. Her guilt was apparent—but so was her love.

Gyu Jin pressed his lips together as if he was trying to hold in the need to curse out his mom for being *so fucking perfectly sweet*.

Instead, he nodded. Quiet. Mechanical.

And took what he needed.

Gyu Jin slumped out 50,000 won onto the karaoke table. Seong Jun turned his head slowly, eyes narrow and dangerous.

“I said, bring the fucking ID.”

One shove. One motion. That was all it took.
Gyu Jin was pinned to the wall.

Of course, they both knew how this would end.

Later—
He stumbled out the door gripping his ribs. Fresh bruises stacked on old ones. His body screamed with every breath. The streetlight painted him silver, highlighting the blooming red beneath his eye.

He crouched, elbows on knees, breath shaky.

Then—

“Geez. Who did you piss off?”

A voice.

Not mocking. Not cruel. Just… curious.

He looked up at a boy his age, maybe older. Vaguely familiar. Soft brown hair. Sharp features. Not threatening.

“Oh—I… just an argument with friends. It’s really nothing—”

“Tch. Yeah right. They beat the shit outta you.”

The boy offered a hand. Gyu Jin flinched at first, then hesitantly accepted.

The damage was now more apparent to the boy as Gyu Jin was standing rather glooming under him in his crouched position.

“Seriously, are your friends Doomfist? Get new ones. These guys want you dead.”

A small laugh escaped Gyu Jin. It felt… foreign. But nice.

“Yeah… I guess I’d like that too.”

The boy gestured to his cheek.

“That’ll bruise bad. Take this.”

He handed him ointment—just like that. No strings.

“…Why are you…?”

“Just being a good citizen.”

He turned to go. His friends were calling him back, but before leaving, he looked over his shoulder.

“Find new friends, okay?”

Gone. Just like that. Like a passing train. Warm and fast—here, then vanished.

But Gyu Jin barely had time to breathe before the world turned cold again.

Seong Jun stood outside the karaoke building, cigarette forgotten between his fingers, eyes fixed on him with a venomous stare. Jaw clenched. Face unreadable.

That wasn’t anger. It wasn’t annoyance.

It was something else.

Gyu Jin didn’t wait to find out. He ran.

The next day, the school hallways buzzed with the same empty chaos—shouting, laughing, footsteps that never ended. Nothing had changed.

And yet, everything had.

Gyu Jin kept his head down, hood low over his forehead like a flimsy shield. He didn’t want to be seen. He just needed the bathroom—then he could disappear again. He cursed himself for not going at home, where it was safe.

He walked faster.

He almost made it, too.

A hand landed lightly on his shoulder.

His heart stopped.

“Seriously this early in the morning, can I catch a fucking brea—”

“Your face looks better, looks like my Divine intervention was needed.”

That voice—warm, teasing. That boy again.
Gyu Jin blinked up, startled. It was him—the boy from the karaoke alley.

“Oh… it’s you.”

“You sound so disappointed,” the boy pouted playfully. “Were you expecting someone else?”

“What? No—I just—wasn’t expecting anyone at all.”

Now that he saw him under fluorescent light, Gyu Jin could really see him. His dark brown hair framed sharp features, and his smile was wide and lopsided like he didn't take the world too seriously. His presence was like a random ice cream truck in summer—unplanned, strangely delightful, and impossibly out of place.

"I didn't know you went here."

"I've seen you around," the boy said, raising a brow. "Hanging out with those guys… Seong Jun, right? Your friends from the karaoke club."

Gyu Jin flinched, the name hitting like a backhand.

"They're not—" he paused. "I mean, they… yeah. My friends."

The lie tasted bitter.

The boy didn't push it. Just smiled again, gentler this time.

"Well. You owe me forever now, by the way. Fixed your face."

Gyu Jin raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you say you were just being a good citizen?"

"Yeah," the boy grinned. "Semiotics."

Then, just as abruptly as he came, he spun around on his heel and strutted down the hallway with no explanation, no goodbye—just that ridiculous word trailing behind him.

Gyu Jin watched him leave. He felt that same weird warmth. *Strange… he kind of wanted it to stay this time.*

Unseen—but not unnoticed.

Seong Jun had been watching. Leaned casually against the lockers, one hand in his pocket, the other tugging slightly at his lower lip. His jaw twitched as he watched the whole interaction unfold.

That boy.

That boy had touched his toy.

And Gyu Jin smiled. Smiled. *Not* the broken, forced smile he wore under Seong Jun's boot. No. *This was different.*

Soft.
Warm.
Happy.

And fuck. It pissed him off.

Yoon Dong never bothered him. He was nothing. But this new guy? Tall. Confident. Not afraid. *And Gyu Jin smiled for him like he mattered.*

That wasn't allowed.

That shouldn't be possible.

"Fucking hell," Seong Jun muttered, seething quietly.

He watched Gyu Jin fumble back into motion, shuffling toward the bathroom. Seong Jun's nails scraped along the locker as he stepped forward, *something snapping loose in his chest.*

"I'll be back," he told his friends without even looking at them.

Then he followed.

Gyu Jin finally found the bathroom stall. He exhaled deeply as if his whole body had been holding itself in.

He stepped out, and *the world cracked open.*
A hard shove slammed his back against the cold tiled wall. He cried out softly, breath knocked from his lungs as pain flared through his ribs.

He looked up, eyes wide—

Seong Jun.

Expression unreadable. Jaw clenched. That same terrifying look from outside the karaoke—but this time, *closer.*

"Seong Jun—"

A gasp replaced his words as Seong Jun's hand gripped his jaw again, fingers pressing hard. The taller boy leaned in, invading his space so completely it felt like the walls had collapsed around them.

"Who is he?"

His voice was low, almost calm—but *something coiled behind it. Something dangerous.*

"W-What…? Who?"

"Don't play dumb." Seong Jun's face moved closer, breath hitting Gyu Jin's cheek. "The boy. The one who made you smile like a fucking idiot."

"I don't—he just gave me something—"

Seong Jun's hand shifted, eyes burning into the bruise that had vanished.

"How the fuck is your face not bruised?"

"…He gave me ointment," Gyu Jin whispered. "That's all—he just… helped me."

Seong Jun went still.
Then he laughed. Quiet. Cold.

"You let him *touch* you?"

"What—no—Seong Jun—"

The grip vanished—and then came the fist.
A brutal punch cracked across Gyu Jin's cheek, knocking him to the ground. His body hit tile with a sick thud, *pain exploding through his body like sparks under his skin.*

He scrambled backward until he hit the corner. Breath ragged. Eyes glassy.

Tears didn't come from fear anymore—they came from impact.

Seong Jun crouched down in front of him, staring.

Then he pressed a palm—slowly, deliberately—against Gyu Jin's ribs. Right on the spot he knew would hurt.

A choked cry escaped Gyu Jin's throat.

"Gyu Jin. Look at me."

Those words were enough.

Gyu Jin forced his eyes open. Damp lashes, parted lips, cheeks flushed.

For the first time—*Seong Jun called him by name.*

"I like you better like this. Not when you smile for someone else. This. And who do you listen to?"

Gyu Jin couldn't speak. His whole body was trembling. *Why was this happening? Why was Seong Jun suddenly… like this?*

He didn't understand.
His lips parted, shaking.

"You," he breathed. "Seong Jun…"

That name—said like a prayer, or a curse.
Seong Jun smirked, then grabbed him by the hair and yanked him to his feet, enjoying the whimper it drew.

He pressed Gyu Jin hard against the wall again and leaned in so close their noses nearly touched.

"Don't fix this one."

He dragged his thumb over the blooming red mark on Gyu Jin's cheek. Gyu Jin flinched violently.

Seong Jun scoffed.
He shoved him away like garbage.

"Fucking idiot, Fuck-Gyu."

Then, he walked out. Like he hadn't just carved something into Gyu Jin with his hands.

And Gyu Jin stayed frozen against the wall, heart pounding, *unsure if it was fear or something even worse than that.*

The walk to school had always been tense for Gyu-Jin.

But today… it was different.

It wasn't just walking into a bomb like usual. No—this time, it felt like walking into a different kind of explosion altogether. One where the heat didn't just burn—it lingered. Where the smoke clung to your lungs in a new, unfamiliar way. Like he was bracing for pain… but the kind that came with questions instead of bruises.

Every step forward made his chest tighten.
Seong-Jun's words and actions from the day before had burrowed into his mind like splinters. Not just the threat of violence or humiliation. It was something else—something much more confusing.

He always assumed Seong-Jun had picked him because he was small. Easier to push around. Easier to ignore. Just another target.

But yesterday? Yesterday felt different.

It was like Seong-Jun didn't want anyone else to touch him. Like he was... *possessive*. Like he wasn't bullying him just because he could, but because he needed to. Like he was staking a claim.

And that made everything worse.

He couldn't ask about it. He wasn't stupid. If he did, Seong-Jun would probably snap—laugh it off, mock him, maybe shove him into a wall again just for good measure.

So, Gyu-Jin decided: he'd pretend. Pretend nothing happened. Keep his head down. Walk to school. Get through the day.

Just like always.

He hadn't watched the news this morning. Couldn't. His brain was fogged up with too many spiraling thoughts. But now, nearing the school gates, he fished out his phone and clicked on

a news update—some attempt to ground himself in something real. Something unrelated to the breath that hit his mouth yesterday.

He was halfway through the video when—

Bam.

He crashed into someone, stumbling backward, barely managing to catch himself upright.

"Yah! Watch where the fuck you walk—fucking idiot who the fuck…?"

"…Sorry… I wasn't watching where I was going."

He gave a small bow, already cringing at the voice. But when the hand cracked across the side of his head—

"Fuck-Gyu!"

His stomach dropped.

"You wanna die today, huh?"

He blinked. That nickname. That voice—

Not Seong-Jun.

Park Min-Hyuk.
One of Seong-Jun's lackeys. Loud. Crude. Obnoxious. But not him.

Gyu-Jin let out a shaky breath. It came unfiltered, like a silent sigh of relief. It didn't matter if he was about to get insulted or even shoved around again.

As long as it wasn't him.

Because if it had been Seong-Jun, that exhale—that single breath—would've been a mistake. It would've been punished.

Min-Hyuk didn't notice it, thank God.
But Gyu-Jin had barely finished calming himself when he took a sudden jab to the side.

"What the fuck is up with you lately, going mute? Yah! You lose your fucking hearing or something?"

"Sorry. Really… I'll watch where I'm going next time."

He gave another polite bow and moved to slip past him—but his backpack was yanked back, throwing him slightly off balance.

"You think just because Seong-Jun's not here today, you get a free pass? Aish… this fucker's face is so annoying—"

A fist raised. Gyu-Jin flinched back instinctively—but then—

A hand tapped Min-Hyuk on the shoulder.

“Yo, the disciplinary council’s right there, dumbass. They’re checking uniforms. You wanna get caught again?”

Lee Ji-Hoon. Another one of Seong-Jun’s shadows. His voice wasn’t aggressive—just practical.

Min-Hyuk groaned. “Shibal… this fucker…”
He finally dropped his hand and shoved Gyu-Jin forward by the backpack, hard.

He didn’t say a word. Just walked.

Didn’t look back. Didn’t breathe too loud.
Just disappeared into the school building like a ghost.

Gyu Jin walked through the hallways with sharp, purposeful steps — not out of confidence, but necessity. Like a soldier walking through a battlefield, he knew every glance could be a landmine. He just needed to make it to the classroom, undetected. No karaoke boy. No Seong Jun. No one.

Just air.

He turned the corner and slowed for half a second.

“Hyung, take my number — I’ll call you tonight!”

“Mhm. Make sure you’re free when you do.”

Voices. Gyu Jin blinked into focus, only to freeze. Right there, outside the classroom door, was Seong Jun — smug and casual as ever — taking a girl's number, fingers brushing hers as he accepted the paper with a lazy grin.

Gyu Jin’s feet felt heavy. His gaze lingered a second too long, heart stumbling in a rhythm that didn’t make sense.

Right. That’s all it ever was, he told himself. He just doesn’t like when other people touch his things.

Like a spoiled child whose toy got taken. Nothing deeper. Nothing else.

Then — Seong Jun looked at him.

No smirk. No sneer. Just… a glance. Almost like he was acknowledging a speck of dust in the air. A plant in the corner of the room. Something there, not necessarily worth reacting to.

That was somehow worse.

Gyu Jin snapped his eyes away, ducking into the classroom as fast as he could without outright running. His chest tightened, but he said nothing, dropping into his seat like a puppet with cut strings.

Books on desk. Elbows planted. Head in hands.

The moment he let his fingers run shakily through his hair, it all settled.

That's it. That look confirmed it. Nothing changed. Yesterday didn't mean anything. He wasn't some twisted exception or special target. He was just another victim, just one Seong Jun happened to be possessive over.

That was all.

It made sense. It had to.

His thoughts, once spiraling violently, now clicked into place. Finally, a version of the truth he could live with.

Nothing's changed.

He told himself that. Again. And again. Until the weight in his stomach lightened just enough to let him breathe.

But if only he knew how wrong he was.

Seong Jun walked into the classroom moments later, the familiar drag of his shoes across the tiles a low warning hum.

Eyes forward, Gyu Jin didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Seong Jun didn't go to his own desk.

He stopped behind him.

"This freak… is he sleeping again?"

The voice sliced into the quiet.

Gyu Jin blinked — but too late. A hard kick hit the leg of his chair, sending it lurching forward. His hands slipped off the desk.

He twisted around, confused. Why would someone—

Seong Jun.

His stomach dropped.

Panic flared in his eyes, breath catching sharp in his throat.

"Why are you sitting—"

“Fuck, Gyu…” Seong Jun said, voice syrupy with mock concern, “You shouldn’t sleep in class, you know. The teacher will be worried.”

The fake sweetness of it made Gyu Jin’s skin crawl. It wasn’t just the tone — it was the smile that didn’t reach his eyes, the smugness settled into every inch of his face.

And then—

Another kick to the back of the desk. Louder this time.

“Gyu Jin! Keep it quiet back there!” the teacher barked. “The chairs don’t have wheels, so stop dragging it across the floor — you’re distracting the other children.”

“…Sorry, sir.”

His voice was quiet. Embarrassed.
He turned slowly back to face the front, shoulders hunched inward.

The sting of attention felt like heat on the back of his neck.

Behind him, a low, satisfied chuckle escaped Seong Jun’s lips.

This fucking asshole.

The rest of the week bled into itself.

Same crowded, deafening hallways.

Same teachers, same dusty chalkboards.
And, of course—same Kang Seong-Jun.

It was like nothing had happened in that bathroom.

Like none of it left a dent. Like Seong-Jun hadn't stared at him like that. Like Gyu-Jin hadn't flinched at the heat in his eyes, the tone of his voice, or the way he'd hovered way too close in a space meant for one.

But maybe nothing had happened.

Maybe that moment had only felt different because Gyu-Jin had been too on edge, too sleep-deprived, too everything.

He never saw the boy from the karaoke club again, not in the hallways, not in class, not even passing by in the courtyard. The guy didn’t even have a name in Gyu-Jin’s head anymore.

Just a brief, weird glitch in his day that vanished without warning.

Like one of those ice cream trucks that rolls into your neighborhood only once in your life, hands you a weirdly perfect flavor that no one else seems to have heard of—then disappears

forever. No music. No trail. Not even a wrapper to prove it happened.

Gyu-Jin was disappointed, sure. But… maybe that was a good thing.

Because whatever happened in the bathroom—whatever that was—it wasn't something he ever wanted to face again.

Not because he thought he'd get hurt again. No, he knew exactly how to deal with pain. He'd mapped out survival long ago.
It was the possibility of Seong-Jun showing something other than hate, annoyance, or boredom toward him.

Because that day… it had been something else. Something off.

And Gyu-Jin didn't know what to do with that.
Worst of all, he didn't even know if he hated it.

The final bell of the day rang

Chairs scraped back. Voices shot up.

Laughter. Curses. Footsteps pounding.

Gyu-Jin blinked himself out of whatever spiral he was in, zipped up his bag, and stood. The classroom buzzed around him, but it all passed like static.

He left without saying anything.
Out the classroom.
Down the hall.
Through the front gates.

And into the street—cold pavement beneath his shoes, sky above slowly fading to the kind of dull blue that meant rain was coming.

He didn't check his phone. Didn't message anyone. He thought to message Yoon Dong, to hang out. But he didn't. He just walked—nowhere in particular. He didn't want to go home, not yet. There'd be no one there anyway. His mom would be working in her shop.

The wind picked up as he crossed the street, sharp and quick.

Then the first raindrop hit his cheek.

Five more followed. And then, as if someone had flipped a switch, it started pouring.

Gyu-Jin hunched his shoulders and jogged the next block until he spotted shelter: a narrow overhang between a shuttered pharmacy and a concrete stairwell.

He ducked under it, breath puffing in the sudden chill.

That's when he realized he wasn't alone.

Kang Seong-Jun was already there.

Hood up.
Phone in hand.
One foot resting lazily against the wall like he'd been waiting for the rain to find him.

Gyu-Jin stopped mid-step.

Their eyes locked.

A pause stretched long enough to be uncomfortable.

"…Seriously?" Seong-Jun muttered, not moving. *"You again?"*

Gyu-Jin cleared his throat, keeping his gaze low. *"It's just a roof,"* he mumbled. *"Not like I followed you."*

"Didn't say you did."

Another silence.

Seong-Jun pocketed his phone and looked across the street. The glow from a ramen shop flickered through the storm—its windows fogged with heat, soft yellow light pooling out onto the wet sidewalk.

Warm.
Empty.
Open.

"We're gonna be stuck here a while," he said, voice almost too casual.

Gyu-Jin didn't answer. The sound of rain filled the space between them.

Then Seong-Jun jerked his chin toward the shop. *"You eat?"*

"…No."

"Come on."

He stepped into the rain without looking back—like the decision had already been made for both of them.

Gyu-Jin stood there under the overhang, arms stiff at his sides.

He didn't want to follow. Not really.

But knowing Seong Jun, it would've been easier if he just did what he wanted. Even if it was *extremely* out of character—like eating ramen with him—.

So he stepped out, feet hitting the wet concrete, and hurried after him—keeping just enough distance to pretend it wasn't on purpose.

The ramen shop door chimed behind them.
Warmth wrapped around his body instantly, fogging his glasses, clinging to his skin. The smell of broth and soy and grilled pork hit him like a punch—so rich it made his stomach ache.

Seong-Jun picked the booth in the back without saying anything. Gyu-Jin sat across from him, still unsure how the hell this was happening.

They ordered with minimal words. Two bowls. No extras.

The rain drummed against the window like it was trying to get in.

They didn't talk.

But the silence didn't feel quite like it used to.
It wasn't hostile. Wasn't cold.

It just… hung there.

Like fog.

Like tension waiting to form into something.

And even though no one said anything, Gyu-Jin felt it again—that strange shift. The same one he'd felt in the bathroom.

Whatever was between them—it wasn't back to normal.

But it wasn't the same, either.

Just then, two bowls were placed on their table with a light clatter.

"***Enjoy your ramen! Is there anything else you'd like?***"

Gyu-Jin glanced up instinctively, but Seong-Jun hadn't moved. Still hunched over his phone, thumb scrolling idly, like he wasn't even here.

He waited.

And waited.

But Seong-Jun didn't look up. Didn't even blink in the waitress' direction.

"…Ah—no, we're fine! Thank you," Gyu-Jin said quickly, forcing a polite tone.

The words felt bitter as they left his mouth. He'd spoken for both of them. Like this was some kind of… date.

That's when Seong-Jun looked up. Not at the waitress—he never once acknowledged her. His eyes locked on Gyu-Jin instead, hard and cold, like the words had personally offended him.

The waitress shifted awkwardly, sensing the sudden tension like static in the air. She gave a small bow and hurried off without another word.

“We?”

Seong-Jun’s scoff was sharp. He didn’t blink, didn’t smile—just glared, like Gyu-Jin had said something disgusting.

A lump formed in Gyu-Jin’s throat.

“… you didn’t say anything, so I thought I’d just—”

“You ever come here before?” Seong-Jun cut in, voice too even to be casual. “With that friend of yours?”

Gyu-Jin blinked. The shift confused him. For a second, it almost sounded like normal conversation. He leaned into it.

“Oh. Yeah. I’ve come here a few times with Yoon-Dong.”

Seong-Jun’s face twitched. Then—

“Fuck—you idiot.”

The words weren’t loud, but they were laced with venom. His gaze sharpened, boring straight into Gyu-Jin. It wasn’t just eye contact. It was a quiet, cold warning.

“Not him.”

Right. Not casual.

Never casual with Seong-Jun.

“…No. He’s not my friend. Not really. I just—”

“So I’m the first one.”

His voice dropped just enough to carry weight. He didn’t say it to Gyu-Jin. Not really. It sounded like something he was confirming for himself. His expression shifted into something different—not softer, but satisfied. The kind of look he wore after someone cried in front of him. Or when Gyu-Jin finally gave in, after trying so hard to resist.

Gyu-Jin’s stomach twisted.

He’d said Yoon-Dong brought him here before. So—first one for what?

Seong-Jun took a bite of ramen, gaze lifting to meet Gyu-Jin’s over the rim of his bowl. Gyu-Jin hadn’t touched his own yet.

“You just gonna stare at me and sit there like a dumbass?” he muttered, chopsticks still in hand. “Eat.”

“I—I was going to—”

Before the words even left his mouth fully, chopsticks were shoved toward him. Not thrown. Not aggressive. But sudden.

Ramen pressed to his lips.

Gyu-Jin froze.

“Open,” Seong-Jun said flatly.

He did.

The taste hit his tongue, warm and savory—but the shock burned hotter. He chewed slowly, awkwardly, eyes wide as Seong-Jun leaned back and pulled the chopsticks away.

“If you’re gonna apologize every five minutes, don’t talk.”

The heat in Gyu-Jin’s cheeks had nothing to do with the soup.

Seong-Jun chuckled. “Your face looks fucking dumb right now.”

Gyu-Jin looked down quickly, mumbling through his mouthful. “Mhm…”

A small smile tugged at the edge of his lips before he could stop it.

They ate in silence after that.

But it wasn’t tense anymore.

It wasn’t warm either.

It was just… there. Quiet. Comfortable in the kind of way that shouldn’t be comfortable. Like standing too close to a fire you swore you wouldn’t touch. Like watching a predator from the shadows, knowing he’s already seen you.

Near the end, before Gyu-Jin could finish, Seong-Jun stood abruptly and grabbed his jacket.

“I’m done. Pay when you’re finished.”

He didn’t wait for a response. Just turned and walked toward the door, steps slow, deliberate. But something slipped from his pocket as he moved.

A folded piece of paper.

Gyu-Jin reached down and picked it up.

A number. Neatly written. The girl’s number from earlier. The girl who had asked him to call her.

“Wait—Seong-Jun,” he called out. “You dropped this.”

Seong-Jun turned just enough to see it. His eyes narrowed, then rolled.

“Just throw it out.”

And kept walking.

Just like that.

He hadn’t even hesitated. The number. The girl. The obvious interest. Gone like it didn’t matter.

Gyu-Jin looked down at the paper in his hand.
He was pretty sure she liked him. And Seong-Jun had looked like he liked her too. Back then, anyway.

So why—

Why did it make him feel relieved?

And why did that make him feel worse?

Gyu-Jin didn’t finish his meal.

He sat staring into the half-drunk broth until it cooled to a skin, chopsticks resting limp between his fingers.

The noise of the shop carried on—low clinks, quiet slurps, a faint hum of the overhead fan—but it all felt distant, like he’d been pulled just outside the world.

His appetite had vanished somewhere between Seong-Jun’s casual command and the heavy silence that followed. Something in his chest was still coiled, tight. He couldn’t name it, only feel the space it took up.

Eventually, he glanced at the time.

A breath left him—quiet and ragged, like it was the first one he’d taken in hours. He pushed the bowl forward, stood too fast, bowed briefly to the counter staff, paid for both of their meals and stepped out.

The rain had softened into a slow drizzle. Thin droplets tapped against his skin like static—cooling the heat behind his ears, doing nothing to clear his head.

He walked slowly. Deliberate steps. No rush.
The streets were near empty, save for the wet gleam of streetlights on asphalt. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets, eyes on the concrete ahead.

And then—

He saw him.

Seong-Jun, a dozen meters up the road. Hood down now, walking at a steady pace, hands in his coat pockets. Gyu-Jin's stomach dropped, and he froze for just a second.

Shit.

But by then, it was already too late to cross the street, or backtrack without looking stupid. He told himself it didn't matter. He wasn't chasing him. Wasn't following anyone. This was just the way home.

Same direction. That's all.

Until Seong-Jun suddenly stopped.

He turned halfway, half-shadowed by the glow of a vending machine behind him, and just stared.

Gyu-Jin froze mid-step.

"You following me now?"

The words landed soft but sharp. Not loud—just low enough to slice through the rain. Gyu-Jin blinked, heart hammering in his chest.

"What? N-no. I'm just—" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "Just going the same way. That's all."

Seong-Jun sighed. Not a dramatic one, just enough to suggest boredom. Or annoyance. Then he leaned his shoulder against the wall behind him and tilted his head—not a nod, but something close. An unspoken order.

Come here.

Gyu-Jin hesitated.

But his body moved anyway.

Step by step, slow and unsure, as if drawn forward by something invisible—like he was already caught.

He stopped just short of Seong-Jun's reach, trying not to meet his eyes.

"You always that obedient?" Seong-Jun asked, voice low, conversational.

Gyu-Jin stiffened.

Then, with a tilt of his head and a flicker of something cruel behind his lashes, Seong-Jun added,

"Or just when someone tells you to open your mouth?"

The words landed hard. Gyu-Jin's throat went dry. He stammered, lips parting for a response that didn’t come. A flash of heat rushed to his face.

The silence that followed was thick—like fog trapped between their bodies. Neither of them moved.

No eye contact.

Just the tension breathing between them.

Then Seong-Jun shifted slightly, angling toward him, voice almost gentle.

“You scared of me right now?”

The question was quieter. Too quiet.

Gyu-Jin swallowed. “No.”

Wrong answer.

That flicker of interest—whatever it had been—snapped out behind Seong-Jun’s eyes. His mouth twitched, not quite a smile. Something darker.

“Yeah. Thought so.”

He stepped forward.

And in a single movement, shoved Gyu-Jin back hard against the wall. Not a full throw—just a controlled, sharp motion, enough for Gyu-Jin’s shoulder blades to hit concrete with a dull thud.

Gyu-Jin flinched.

The closeness was suffocating. Seong-Jun loomed there for a second too long, eyes locked on him, the tension humming like an aftershock between their bodies.

Then he scoffed.

“Being nice to you made you too comfortable.”

And with no warning, his hand shot out—quick, firm, fingers curling lightly at the base of Gyu-Jin’s throat. Not a real choke. Just enough pressure to make his pulse spike.

His grip tightened once, then released. Not lingering.

Gyu-Jin didn’t move.

Seong-Jun didn’t wait for him to.

He stepped back, turned on his heel like nothing had happened, and began walking again.

“See you Monday, fuck-Gyu,” he called over his shoulder, not looking back.

The rain didn’t feel cold anymore.

The weekend passed like static.

Gyu-Jin didn’t leave the house. He told himself it was because of the rain, or homework, or just exhaustion—but none of that was true. He just couldn’t stop thinking about that walk.

About the way Seong-Jun had pulled him forward. The way his voice had dropped low, intimate, threatening. The way that stupid grin had flickered and died the second he’d said he wasn’t scared.

He’d meant it. He wasn’t scared in that moment—not of getting hurt.
But of what, then?

He didn’t want to think about it.

Every time he remembered the sound of chopsticks clacking against the ramen bowl or the way Seong-Jun had shoved food into his mouth like he owned him, Gyu-Jin’s stomach twisted in some uncomfortable, embarrassing knot.

Sunday night, Gyu-Jin sat in bed, eyes on the ceiling, blanket pulled over his chest though it wasn’t cold. He tried to imagine walking into school on Monday and just acting normal again.

He didn’t know if he could.

-Monday

When Monday came, it arrived without mercy.
The school halls buzzed as usual, fluorescent lights flickering slightly above the heads of the half-awake students pouring into classrooms.

Gyu-Jin drifted through the morning like a ghost—present but untouched, unseen. The lectures droned on, words bouncing off his ears like static.

He nodded when he had to, jotted a few notes here and there, but none of it stayed. His brain refused to settle, spiraling instead in loops of fragmented memories from Friday night—the alley, the ramen shop, the biting rain, and the way Seong-Jun had looked at him in the glow of that flickering store sign.

Not angry. Not annoyed. Something else.
Something worse.

He hadn’t seen Seong-Jun at all during the morning. Not in the corridors. Not in their shared classes. It wasn’t completely unusual—he skipped the early periods more often than not—but the absence settled into Gyu-Jin’s chest like relief laced with dread.

Still, part of him had been watching the door.

The final bell before lunch shrieked through the building, and the classroom dissolved into chaos. Students launched from their seats like caged dogs let loose, scrambling toward the cafeteria as if the food might evaporate if they didn't get there first.

Gyu-Jin waited. He moved slowly, letting the crowd pass him by, not wanting to be caught in the fray. When he finally entered the cafeteria, the echo of chairs scraping and trays slamming had died down into a more manageable hum.

He sat alone. His tray landed with a dull clatter. Rice, soup, some nameless gray meat. It all looked the same. It all tasted like air.
His fingers absently prodded at the food, eyes downcast, thoughts circling again.

He hadn't been paying attention when three trays clattered onto the table across from him, snapping him upright like a slap. He blinked rapidly, heart jumping into his throat—half-expecting the usual trio of Seong-Jun and his lackeys.

But instead, it was three students he barely recognized.

Two girls, one boy. They were smiling too much. Strangely familiar, but unfamiliar all the same. Classmates, maybe. Faces he might've passed in hallways but never exchanged a word with.

"***Gyu-Jin-ah, right? From Class 5?***"

The girl closest to him leaned forward, resting her chin on her palm. Her tone was too casual to be genuine.

"***We're from the same class! That means we're practically friends, right?***"

Something about the way she said it made his stomach turn. Still, he nodded slowly, voice quiet.

"Ah… yeah. I think I've seen you around…"

They all lit up like he'd just granted them permission. The boy straightened up, too eager.

"***Great! So we wanted to ask—***"

A sharp elbow to his ribs cut him off, the other girl giving him a tight-lipped glare before plastering on a sweet expression.

"***—Just wanted to get to know you better. That's all. We always see you eating alone, and, y'know… it looked kind of sad.***"

Right. That kind of 'friendship.'

He forced a smile. "I'm okay, really."

But they didn't take the hint.

"***Come on. We're just trying to be friendly. And we've seen you hanging around Seong-Jun and his group…***"

The name dropped like ice water down his spine.

"What about them?"

"***We just figured,***" she went on, "if you help them out sometimes… you wouldn't mind helping us too? With notes and stuff."

There it was. The real reason.

Gyu-Jin's smile thinned.

"Well, I—"

"***You helped them,***" the other girl chimed in, her pout exaggerated to the point of parody. "Why not us?"

"I don't think I have my notes right now, I—"

Three trays dropped beside them with a jarring slam. Gyu-Jin flinched, head snapping up so fast he barely caught the motion.

Seong-Jun.
And his shadows.

He sat directly across from Gyu-Jin, shoulders loose, jaw working like he hadn't just shattered the mood.

"***You making new friends, fuck-Gyu?***" His voice was saccharine, all mockery dipped in honey. "What about us? You ditching us now?"

A beat of laughter behind him from the lackeys. The table froze.

The three newcomers gave tight, uncomfortable smiles and exchanged glances like they were mentally counting their escape routes.

"Go on," Seong-Jun prompted. "Don't let me interrupt."

"R-right… Gyu-Jin, you were saying…?"

He didn't answer immediately. His eyes dropped to his food, trying to regain focus, trying to act like none of this mattered.

Then—

A sudden, sharp pain lit up his shin.

Gyu-Jin bit the inside of his cheek hard, eyes darting up.

Seong-Jun still wasn't looking at him.
He looked bored, focused on his food. His hands didn't move. His expression didn't shift.

But that kick had been deliberate, unmistakable.

A warning.

"I… I think I left my notes at home," Gyu-Jin managed, voice steadier than he felt. "If you want, you can stop by my mom's store later and—"

Another kick. Harder this time. His breath hitched.

"I—sorry. I… maybe not."

The boy frowned. "But you just said—"

"Yeah, come on, Gyu-Jin," the first girl whined. "You helped them. You can help us too, right?"

He tried to reply, but the third kick made him freeze.

He didn't even bother looking at Seong-Jun. He already knew.

"…Sorry. I can't."

The conversation limped along after that. The three classmates still tried to engage him, but every time he so much as lifted his gaze, another sharp tap to the leg followed. Every time he tried to form words, his voice died in his throat.

They weren't seeing it.
Or maybe they were.
Maybe they were just pretending not to.

After the sixth kick, Gyu-Jin stood abruptly, tray in hand.

"I should get going."

"What? Class isn't for another twenty minutes—"

"I have something to work on."

He didn't look at Seong-Jun. Couldn't. He walked quickly, dumped his untouched food into the trash, and stepped into the hallway, heart thudding against his ribs like a caged animal.

He pulled out his phone, hands shaking slightly, and typed. Texting Yoon Dong in a nervous frenzy.

-Dude where are you
[12:12 p.m.]

-Seriously I hardly see you anymore
[12:12 p.m.]

-Did something happen? Text me when you get this
[12:13 p.m.]

“You should stop catching strays.”

The voice came from behind. Too close.

Gyu-Jin jumped.

Before he could turn around, Seong-Jun had already reached around him, plucking the phone from his hand.

“Hey—!”

“Look at me when I talk to you.”

Gyu-Jin’s eyes snapped up, panic catching in his throat.

Seong-Jun was too close. He leaned in like he had all the time in the world, the hallway buzzing behind him as if none of it applied to them.

“They just wanted my notes... I don’t even know them,” Gyu-Jin murmured, voice tight, eyes still avoiding Seong-Jun’s.

“Seems like you don’t know anyone who talks to you,” Seong-Jun said, low and almost bored, but the way he stepped closer didn’t feel casual. He leaned in with calculated ease, posture loose, but every move deliberate — closing the space like a trap resetting itself.

His gaze never wavered as he slowly dipped to Gyu-Jin’s level, until they were eye-to-eye — or would’ve been, if Gyu-Jin weren’t already flickering away.

“You’re not gonna give them anything,” Seong-Jun said, tone deceptively light, “are you?”

Gyu-Jin flinched like the words themselves brushed against his skin. He shifted, instinctively trying to lean back, but the wall behind him was too close — too solid — and he only managed a shallow breath. His voice was barely a whisper.

“...No. I won’t.”

A pause.

Then Seong-Jun straightened — slowly, like he had all the time in the world. “Hm. Good.”

He towered again, and his smirk returned just as he caught Gyu-Jin’s gaze flick down, eyes landing not on Seong-Jun’s face — but the phone still balanced casually in his hand.

He noticed.

And smiled wider.

Seong-Jun pocketed the phone. Casual. Cruel.
"***You want this back?***"

"Yes."

"We're on clean-up duty together," Seong-Jun said with a shrug. "Didn't think you even saw the board."

Gyu-Jin stiffened.

"I wasn't going to show up, but… now it seems fun, I'll give it back then.

The smirk that followed made his stomach sink. Seong-Jun turned, hands in his pockets, leaving the hallway without another word.

Gyu-Jin stood there for a long moment, breathing like he'd just escaped something.
But he hadn't escaped anything at all.

Fucking hell

The final bell rang with no ceremony—just a shrill whine, too loud in his ears.

Classrooms emptied like floodgates had been pulled open. Students filed out in waves, shoving desks, scraping chairs, laughing like they'd just escaped a cage. Gyu-Jin sat still.

His desk was neat, notes stacked. His pencil rolled once, twice, before he caught it and held it tightly in his palm.

He'd seen it.
His name.
Next to Seong-Jun's on the whiteboard at the front of the class.

Clean-up duty.

The two names looked like a bad joke written in thick black marker. The kind of fate that felt like punishment for something he hadn't done. He stared at it again just to be sure, just in case his mind had been playing tricks.

No such luck.

He hadn't seen Seong-Jun all through the last period—he never showed up. The logical part of him said maybe he wouldn't come at all. Maybe he'd blown it off like he usually did. Maybe Gyu-Jin could just sweep the room in silence and disappear before anything happened.

Maybe.

But logic never really applied when it came to Seong-Jun.

Sighing, Gyu-Jin walked to the supply cabinet, dragging out a broom. The classroom already felt emptier, darker, even with the lights on.

The quiet scraped against his skin like sandpaper.

He swept slowly. Deliberately. The sound of bristles on the floor was steady, grounding, the only sound echoing off the empty walls.

“You didn’t even wait for me to come. You should have a little more faith in me, fuck-Gyu”

The voice cracked the quiet like a whip.

Gyu-Jin turned sharply toward the door. His chest seized with a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

For the first time, it felt like he was relieved to see Seong Jun. not because he wanted to see him, but because he needed his phone back. That’s what he told himself. That’s the truth he wanted to believe.

“Oh. Seong-Jun.”

Seong-Jun strolled in like he owned the place—lazy, loose-limbed, still in uniform but with his tie hanging crooked and half-untucked. There was something in his gait that always felt casual, but never relaxed.

“Fucks with the disappointed tone?” he muttered, his grin crooked. “Were you expecting someone else?”

Gyu-Jin looked down at the broom in his hand.

“No. I just… I thought you weren’t coming.”

“That so? Wow. Not even a greeting.” Seong-Jun leaned a shoulder against the wall. “You want your phone that bad?”

Gyu-Jin’s eyes flickered to Seong-Jun’s pocket. “You said you’d give it back.”

“I did.” He twirled the phone between his fingers carelessly, like it meant nothing. “And now I’m here.”

“Then—”

“Beg for it.”

The room stalled.

Gyu-Jin blinked. “What?”

Seong-Jun’s voice dropped, low and indifferent. “You heard me.”

He kept twirling the phone until it almost slipped. Gyu-Jin flinched, stepping forward, instinctive.

“Please… can I have my phone back?”

His voice was small, a murmur barely audible in the quiet room.

Seong-Jun tilted his head, unimpressed. “Not like that.”

The phone disappeared into his pocket again. Then he took a step closer. His voice wasn’t teasing anymore. Just calm. Flat.

“Get on your knees.”

This time, Gyu-Jin’s hesitation lasted only a breath.

He slowly sank down to the floor, knees touching the linoleum. No resistance. No words.

The air shifted instantly.

Seong-Jun’s mouth twitched — not in a smile, but in something far more complex. A flash of something darker passed behind his eyes. Surprise, maybe. Or restraint. Or hunger.

“You really are obedient, huh?” he muttered, half to himself. “Is that just your thing…or…”

Gyu-Jin flinched, visibly thrown. His cheeks flushed, lips parted but no words came out. He didn’t meet Seong-Jun’s eyes.

Didn’t dare.

Seong-Jun took a step forward. The sound of his shoes echoed too loud in the room. He crouched down slowly, not kneeling—just low enough to meet Gyu-Jin’s line of sight.

Then Gyu-Jin spoke, voice trembling, unsure:

“Please… Seong-Jun—”

That was the mistake.

Seong-Jun stilled.

His jaw clenched. Something in his gaze flickered—like a line snapped. Not out of anger. But something else. Something he wasn’t ready to let out.

He reached out slowly, hand curling under Gyu-Jin’s jaw, forcing his face upward. Their eyes locked. His fingers were warm against Gyu-Jin’s skin, firm but not rough.

“Don’t say my name when you’re like this.”

Chapter 2: Promise me you'll stay

Chapter Summary

> seong jun is basically a crashout freak the whole chapter

Chapter Notes

> lmao sorry this took longer than expected i was being a retarded tweaker n had really bad withdrawls for like a week or so n when i tried to write intoxinated i wrote bullshit so i made this chapter hella long, also there arent rlly many characters n shit so i added js random background characters so shit makes sense but dw they have no real significance to the story so it wont be annoying also i realized i had been spelling young dongs name wrong that whole chapter LMAO sorry

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn't a threat.
It wasn't playful.

It was restraint — thin, cracking restraint.

Seong-Jun's grip on Gyu Jin's jaw wasn't soft, but it wasn't the usual cruel roughness either.

It was the kind of hold that could hurt if he decided it should — and part of him wanted to — but it lingered instead, dangerous in its stillness. The kind of hurt that made you wait for it.

The boy on his knees was supposed to look pathetic. This was supposed to be a humiliation ritual — Seong-Jun had half-expected Gyu Jin to follow through without protest, half-expected him to fight back. Either outcome would've been amusing. Something to toy with.

But when Gyu Jin said his name like that…

Begging.
Quiet.
Personal.

It was always him — Park Gyu-Jin — trembling at the sight of him, knees on the floor, eyes up. It should have been just another scene to file away as a memory he could laugh at later.

So why the hell did it feel—

"…sorry."

The word landed flat. No rise in tone, no desperation in the syllables. Gyu Jin's lashes lowered, avoiding his gaze entirely, speaking like someone who'd played this game too many times before and knew all the rules.

He didn't seem to notice the shift in the air — like this was no different from any other day Seong-Jun had cornered him. Just apologising on autopilot.

And for some reason, that ignorance scraped at him. It was like Gyu Jin couldn't see the change either… or maybe he could and was deliberately ignoring it. And that thought — that possibility — was something Seong-Jun refused to land on.

"Your face looks fucking dumb right now."

Same words from the ramen shop, but this time there was no smirk behind them. No chuckle to soften the jab.

Seong-Jun straightened, letting go, watching as the boy in front of him blinked up like a puppy whose food bowl had just been taken away.

He scoffed.
"Just take your fucking phone."

The device hit Gyu Jin's chest before he had time to react, making him fumble and stumble before planting his feet again.

Seong-Jun didn't even look back as he walked toward the door.

"Thanks, Seong—… I mean—thank you."

The stutter over his name felt like some parody of a romcom. One Seong-Jun had no intention of starring in — especially not with him.

He rolled his eyes and left, ignoring clean-up duty entirely. Only once the footsteps faded did Gyu Jin realise Seong-Jun had never planned on helping in the first place.

Air rushed into his lungs like he'd been holding his breath this whole time. His exhales shook, his fingers trembling as he unlocked his phone.

A message from Young-Dong.
Another from his mother.

> Young-Dong's read:
> ***Sorry for late response :< Been busy at home so I've been skipping lunch & heading home early. I'll find you at school tomorrow, promise. Mb if I worried u lol***
> **[4:46pm]**

Gyu Jin exhaled again — that slow, flat sigh you give when a joke isn't funny. Relief, yes… but also a faint ache that Young-Dong hadn't been there anyway.

If he had been here, maybe Seong-Jun wouldn't have been treating him like his favourite toy.

Pocketing his phone, Gyu Jin picked up the broom and returned to sweeping. He told himself he wasn't going to let Seong-Jun ruin the bare minimum of his day. He shouldn't let him follow him home in his thoughts.

That was the rule.
That's how it had always been.

But now?

Nothing made sense.

The next morning, Gyu-jin felt like the weight of the world had finally lifted off his shoulders.

Across from him, Young-Dong sat with that ridiculous grin of his, the kind that made the sunlight bouncing off his hair seem almost fake.

He was talking dramatically about how his dad was forcing him to work construction, insisting he drop out of school to spend his days on a building site.

Gyu-jin slipped in little remarks between Young-Dong's complaints, soft and careful, like he didn't want to break the fragile bubble of normalcy surrounding them. He laughed quietly at himself, at the way Young-Dong's eyebrows flinched at every jab, and for a moment, it felt… safe.

Even if Young-Dong could only linger until class started, it felt like something made sense again. Something normal. Something steady.

"Oh, and by the way…" Young-Dong leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, that grin still stretching across his face. "Why did you text me so much when I was gone? I mean, yeah, we're friends, but you were texting like you were about to lose your mind if I didn't show up."

He gave a little chuckle and nudged Gyu-jin lightly with his shoulder.

Gyu-jin's throat tightened. He looked down, at his hands resting on the desk, fingers curling around the edge of his sleeve.

He wanted to explain. He really did. But the words lodged somewhere between his stomach and his lips. How could he say it without sounding… *weird? Without sounding like he'd let*

Seong-Jun's shadow twist his thoughts, make him needy, make him… small? What if he was reading it wrong, what if it was just in his head?

"Uhh… no…" His voice was quiet at first, hesitant. He cleared his throat, trying to steady it. "Nothing happened. I just… thought you were dead, y'know. I'd never forgive you if you died and left me here to suffer."

Young-Dong raised an eyebrow, his grin flickering, and jabbed Gyu-jin lightly in the arm.

"Yah! You just want me here so you don't get bullied alone, huh?" He threw a mock look of offense at Gyu-jin, though his eyes were glimmering with humor. "Could've at least been more discreet saying that, you idiot."

"You know that's not what I meant." Gyu-jin gave a subtle nudge of his shoulder with a low chuckle through his words.

"Mhm." Young-Dong leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. He looked tired, more than he wanted to admit.

Gyu-jin noticed it—the light drag of fatigue in Young-Dong's movements—and it made the moment both heavier and softer.

"You… sleep at all last night?" he asked quietly.

"Mmmm…" Young-Dong groaned, slumping further in his chair. "It's just all that work, ugh… I'm seriously not built for it."

Gyu-jin snorted. Young-Dong parted his lips and scoffed in offense.

"Yah!—"

"I'll get us some coffee." Gyu-jin cut in, standing up, patting the chubbier boy's head.

Young-Dong opened his mouth, probably to say something in retaliation, but Gyu-jin was already moving, sliding out into the hallways with a playful wave over his shoulder. His heartbeat picked up slightly—not from exertion, but from relief, from the familiarity of being near someone who reminded him that normal could exist, even for just a few stolen moments.

★ ☆

Gyu-jin shoved 300 Won into the vending machine.

He stepped back slightly, waiting for the first can to drop. It thudded lightly against the tray, and he crouched instinctively, relief washing over him.

The next sound, though, was different.

A crash.

His eyes snapped up.

A fist rested against the side of the vending machine. And above it loomed that face he didn't want to see.

"Thoughtful," Seong-Jun said lazily. "I was actually pretty tired."

Before Gyu-jin could react, the coffee was gone from his hand.

"Wait!—"

He jumped up. His fingers barely grazed the can, but Seong-Jun was too fast.

The taller boy tilted it open, sipping slowly, deliberately.

Every movement was casual. Every glance, sharp. Condescending.

"…That was for Young-Dong."

Gyu-jin's voice was low, almost a mutter to himself. He didn't even want Seong-Jun to hear it.

Seong-Jun raised an eyebrow. Tilted the can again, letting the liquid slide into his mouth. Corners of his mouth curved slightly.

"So?"

Gyu-jin exhaled. Slow, controlled. He turned back to the vending machine and fed it another 300 Won. The anticipation he'd felt just seconds ago was now a tight knot of anxiety in his chest.

"You were getting two… what? Was this one supposed to be yours?" Seong-Jun's voice was teasing, but sharp, deliberate.

Gyu-jin retrieved the second can, holding it like a fragile thing.

He simply nodded. Slowly. Tentatively.

And then—

In a heartbeat, Seong-Jun's hands were on him.

Hot, crushing pressure on his jaw, tilting his head back, forcing his lips apart. Making him harshly stumble back.

Coffee poured down his throat before he had time to react.

Gyu-jin choked. He clawed at Seong-Jun's hands, his vision swimming, eyes watering as he coughed violently. The liquid burned his throat as if he'd inhaled fire.

The world tilted.

And at the last drop, just as suddenly, Seong-Jun released him.

Gyu-jin gasped, head jerking forward, hands clutching his neck as though it could help the burning sensation.

His chest heaved, breaths shallow and uneven. Every nerve in his body was buzzing, alarmed, humiliated, furious.

“You both got your morning coffee now. Hm?”

The voice was casual. Light. Like it was all a joke.

Gyu-jin’s eyes flickered up and met the taller boy’s darker ones and that’s when Seong-Jun stilled.

Gyu-jin’s fluttering eyes. Full of hatred. Glassy. Trembling. The wet smear of coffee clung to his lips. His jaw shaking as his face flushed red.

He almost looked… *pretty.*

Gyu-jin furrowed his brows, pressed his sleeve to his lips, wiped at his mouth and ran.

Like a deer wounded, desperate.

Seong-Jun froze for a fraction of a second watching him go.

Did he just think that Gyu-jin was pretty?

Fuck.

He’s not a fucking girl.

The curve of his small nose. The damp lashes. The reddened cheeks. When they were a mess —completely undone, all because of him—

He was… pretty, for a boy, he supposed.

Seong-Jun let out a soft sigh, tossed the can aside, slipped his hands into his school blazer pockets, and walked off.

. . . . . .

Gyu-jin basically sprinted to the classroom.

Breathing heavy, he finally reached the room where he had left Young-Dong, now crowded with several other kids as the morning went on.

He crashed onto a seat like he'd just run a marathon, dipping his head into his hands, elbows resting on the desk, letting himself catch his breath.

"You steal the damn coffee or something?"

The accusation had no real bite, just a hint of concern layered under a joke.

Young-Dong tilted his head at Gyu-jin's silence.

Gyu-jin just pushed a canned coffee toward him without lifting his head, as if shoving it away like it was contaminated.

"Remind me to… never get anything from the vending machine again."

Young-Dong looked confused but shrugged, taking the coffee. He sipped, gave a satisfied sigh, and looked back at Gyu-jin, hunched over his desk, still with his head buried in his hands.

"You didn't get one for yourself? Dude, you look like you needed it more than me…"

Gyu-jin turned his head toward him, narrowing his eyes, a makeshift glare that screamed: *don't ask.*

Young-Dong raised his hands in surrender, rolling his eyes back to the coffee in his palm.

"If it was money, I could've just gotten you one, y'know…"

"He's already had his."

Young-Dong jumped. Gyu-jin's breath hitched, making a failed attempt to disappear further into his seat. *If he could sink into a black hole right now, he would.*

"Aren't you in the wrong class, piggy?"

Seong-Jun stepped in with careless ease, dragging his feet across the floor, tapping every desk as he passed before reaching Gyu-jin's.

Gyu-jin refused to make eye contact. He didn't raise his head.

It had been embarrassing enough when it was just the two of them. Having someone forcefully pour a drink down your throat.

If he brought it up in class… he might actually have a heart attack.

Seong-Jun shrugged and grabbed his hair, forcing Gyu-jin's head up so their faces met.

Gyu-jin's expression twisted into the same hateful look from the vending machine, but Seong-Jun wasn't focused on that.

His eyes drifted over Gyu-jin's trembling jaw. Over the fear still flickering there, even through all that hatred. That fear—that was the thrill.

Seong-Jun always called it fear.

But right now, all Gyu-jin could think about was how Seong-Jun had poured half a can of coffee down his throat. How he hadn't been able to do a thing. How embarrassing it had been, worse than fear.

He raised his hands and shoved harshly against Seong-Jun's chest, forcing a moment of distance, and drew a sharp, short breath, eyes snapping at him.

Like a warning. But a warning—*from Fuck-Gyu?*

Seong-Jun blinked. A smirk twitching. That sudden, defiant push didn't sit right.

He leaned forward, ignoring it, and grabbed Gyu-jin's jaw roughly, shaking it as if to correct his expression.

Then he leaned close, letting his breath brush against Gyu-jin's ear.

"Fuck-Gyu. Don't piss me off."

And just like that, he shoved him back harshly and returned to his desk, leaning back, pulling out his phone without even thinking to grab a book. He didn't give Gyu-jin another glance.

Gyu-jin turned to Young-Dong, raising his eyebrows in a silent, *what are you still doing here?*

Young-Dong awkwardly rose from his seat, stumbling before scurrying out of the classroom with a small bow and wave.

And Gyu-jin? He wished he could run too. Right out of the classroom. Out of the world. Out of the humiliation that only Seong-Jun seemed to know how to inflict.

But he didn't.

He stayed, head lowered, chest heaving, the tension between them a quiet, secret storm only the two of them could feel.

Gyu-jin didn't know if it was possible for his day to get worse after that morning. Apparently, the universe was determined to prove him wrong.

He sat glaring at the back of the teacher's head. If looks could kill, the man would have been nothing but a pile of ash by now.

On his desk lay a single sheet of paper: *Team Building Group Project Guidelines.* Four members per team. His own list might as well have been a death sentence.

Park Gyu-jin.
Seo Woo-jae — some random boy he'd never even heard of.
Lee Ji-hoon — Seong-Jun's more grounded lackey.
And the last name, carved into his mind like a curse: Kang Seong-Jun.

A heavy sigh left him, head tipping back into his chair. The fluorescent lights above glared down at him. Why did it feel like the world was actively setting them up? Ever since things had started getting… weird, fate seemed to be shoving them into each other's orbit, again and again.

"Alright! Get into your groups for the first discussion. Work hard, get along with your teammates, okay? Fighting!"

He'd rather be buried alive.

Dragging his feet through the chatter and shuffling desks, Gyu-jin felt more like a ghost than a student. Seong-Jun had called the group to *his* desk — *obviously* he wasn't going to be the one to move.

Gyu-jin's eyes flicked up, meeting Seong-Jun's gaze. That glare — sharp, direct — like the groups had been handpicked by him alone. He didn't want to be here either, so why the hell did he look like *Gyu-jin* was the problem?

Gyu-jin dropped his gaze instantly, hands clasping tight in his lap, fingers twisting over each other.

"You two…" Seong-Jun pointed lazily at him and Woo-jae, his other teammate, "…have the project done with everyone's names on it when it's finished."

So he wasn't interested in working together either. Gyu-jin really didn't mind. As long as they didn't have to talk, he'd happily carry the load.

Woo-jae raised a brow at Gyu-jin.
Gyu-jin shook his head quickly, a silent *don't push it.*
But Woo-jae scoffed and turned right back to the desk's owner.

"Are you two not going to participate?"

Seong-Jun's slow turn toward him was enough to make Gyu-jin want to sink into the floor. That look — condescending, like the question was laughable. His head tilted, voice dipped into mockery.

"Our names at the end… are our participation. What don't you get?"

Under the desk, Gyu-jin kicked Woo-jae's shin. *Hard.*
Woo-jae glanced at him, but Gyu-jin was already throwing frantic hand gestures under the desk: *stop talking you fucking idiot.*

Woo-jae rolled his eyes, shoved the paper toward Seong-Jun, and tapped the section marked *Oral Presentation.*
"There's a speaking portion. If you don't contribute, are you just going to clap for us from the sidelines? Our grade drops if all members don't present. I'm not letting my grade be ruined by some incompetent freeloaders."

The temperature at the table seemed to drop. Gyu-jin knew that expression on Seong-Jun's face — had seen it right before things went bad. Very bad. He wasn't sure if Woo-jae was brave, stupid, or both… but the brave and stupid never lasted long.

Before Seong-Jun could open his mouth, Gyu-jin shot to his feet.
"I—Sir!"

He made for the teacher's desk like his life depended on it.

"I don't think I'm compatible with my teammates. I'd like to switch groups. There's no way we can work together."

His words came out fast but small, gaze downturned.

The teacher arched a brow, glancing between him and the desk in the distance where Seong-Jun sat — looking seconds away from snapping Woo-jae's neck.

"Park Gyu-jin. You've complained about a group member before, haven't you?"

"…ah… yes, sir… well—"

"We know you and Kang Seong-Jun don't get along, but I think this is a perfect chance for some team building. Work through your differences. Learn about each other."

Hopeless. Seriously… Did this guy seriously believe they could "work things out"?

"Sir, we just don't—"

"Gyu-jin, stop bothering this poor teacher."

His voice died instantly.
An arm draped heavy across his shoulders.

Gyu-jin's head snapped up, meeting the taller boy's shadowed eyes before Seong-Jun turned them toward the teacher — the picture of harmless friendliness.

The hand on his shoulder tightened, pulling him in until his balance faltered.

"We'll work together just fine, sir. I'll make sure Gyu-jin never leaves my side."

Too close. Gyu-jin could feel the thump of Seong-Jun's heartbeat through his uniform. His face burned. He didn't understand why, but he couldn't stay this close. He tried to lean away, but the arm around him only pulled tighter.

"Seong-Jun… could you…" His voice was low, shaky, as if it were meant only for him.

"Hm?"
The grip shifted, guiding Gyu-jin's chin up until their eyes met. The expression there wasn't the soft facade for the teacher — it was darker, sharper.

Why the hell was *he* the one annoyed?

But to the teacher? *This looked completely different.*
An unnecessarily large smile curled across his face, slouched back, crossing his arms. Nodding slowly like he'd just confirmed something for himself.

"Ahhhh. So it's like that. Huh…"

Gyu-jin snapped his head towards the teacher.

"Maybe I shouldn't've put you two in a group then…."

Gyu-jin's eyes went wide, his cheeks felt more than heated.

"No! No—it's not like that! Not at all it's—"

Seong-Jun basically dug his fingers into Gyu-jin's shoulder. His voice stopped.

"We'll be off now," Seong-Jun said, already steering him toward the door, tossing a mocking "sir" over his shoulder.

. . . . . .

The hallway swallowed them in near-silence. Gyu-jin barely had time to breathe after a minute or two of being dragged down the halls before his back slammed into a bank of lockers.

A hand smashed beside his head, close enough that the metal rattled. His eyes snapped up. His breath hitched, but anger cut through it.

"Why the hell did you do that?" he spat, breathless — for the first time seemingly standing up to Seong-Jun. "Seriously, why are you the one mad at—"

"Don't do that."

“W—”

The palm on his shoulder shoved harder, harsher, pinning him to cold steel.

“Don’t try to run away from me.”

Fingers threaded through his hair — an almost gentle motion that made his pulse trip. His body betrayed him; the sudden heat crawling up his neck snuffed out the small spark of defiance he’d had moments ago. And Seong-Jun wasn’t even being violent.

“You don’t get to run away, Gyu-jin.” The way his name rolled out of that low, rough voice made it sound more like a claim than a warning. He dipped down, breath brushing his ear.

“Don’t make me break your legs.”

Gyu-jin froze. His hands hung useless at his sides, trembling.

The touch slid from his hair to the back of his neck, sending an involuntary shudder straight down his spine.

“Understood?”

Gyu-jin stood, felt trapped underneath the taller boy. *Why was he reacting to this? Like this? To the boy who had tormented him for months on end?*

Gyu-jin didn’t know what to say.

He nodded before he even realized what he was doing.

The fingers around his nape tightened, forcing him close, too close. The closeness felt suffocating.

“Use your words.”

Gyu-jin stilled, breath shaking.

“…I won’t run… I’ll… stay.”

Gyu-jin’s eyes — lashes batting with every nervous shudder or breath — looking up at Seong-Jun’s voided eyes under heavy lashes, almost looked like he hadn’t blinked once.

Then—

He blinked. A smirk broke across Seong-Jun’s face, and he pushed himself off Gyu-jin. Like he was playing some twisted game.

“Also. I changed my mind. I’m preparing and presenting the oral with you. The other two can handle the visuals.”

Gyu-jin nearly choked on air, wanted to protest — but Seong-Jun was already walking away.

Gyu-jin didn't recognize his own voice. He didn't understand why he just agreed like that. He didn't even force him to. In fact, this was the softest he thought he'd ever been with him. So why did his body react like that? Just… weak. Why didn't he just push him off and ask why he'd been doing this? Why he'd been acting like this? Why he was making Gyu-jin feel like this…?

The rest of the group had all agreed to Seong-Jun's new conditions. Even Woo-Jae, of all people, seemed almost… pleased with the arrangement. Confused by the sudden shift, yes — but pleased nonetheless.

Classes had ended, and it was time, unfortunately, to get started on the project.

… … …

Gyu-jin sighed.

"As I stated before, we should have gone to the library earlier. Now it's crowded and we have nowhere to start."

Woo-Jae stood in front of the three other boys like he was about to present a lecture. Chin slightly lifted, posture straight, voice clipped and precise.

Gyu-jin stood awkwardly off to the side, while Seong-Jun and Ji-Hoon had claimed spots against the wall, sinking into the posture of people who looked like they had all the time in the world.

"Let's just go to a PC café. Or a public library," Ji-Hoon said, drawl laced with nonchalance, as if the answer was so obvious only an idiot would argue. "God, were you born with a stick up your ass?"

He spoke with that brand of lazy confidence that came from knowing he was right more often than not — even if he never cared enough to prove it.

"Out-of-campus studying without teachers or adult supervision?" Woo-Jae's tone sharpened, incredulous. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Yah." Ji-Hoon didn't even bother to sit up straighter. "If we wanted to beat the two of you up, we'd have no problem doing it right here. *On campus*."

Their voices dissolved into static in Gyu-jin's ears. The back-and-forth jabbed at his focus until it frayed. His thoughts began looping, jagged and insistent.

Just shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut—

"Fuck-Gyu."

Seong-Jun's voice cut through. His head tilted, eyes half-lidded.

“What you think? Hm?”

The sudden attention jarred him back. Seong-Jun was already looking bored, as if the answer didn’t matter in the slightest — as if he’d only asked to see him squirm.

But Gyu-jin still answered.

“Oh. Well. I think the public library is a good idea… there’d be some of the books we might need for research anyway… and bigger tables…”

His voice was quiet, unsteady. He doubted it made a difference. The group’s dynamics were already clear — whose voices carried weight, and whose didn’t.

“What?! Whose side are you on—”

“Alright, library it is.”

Seong-Jun peeled himself off the wall in one unhurried motion. Ji-Hoon stretched lazily, following without protest.

Woo-Jae’s eyes went wide. A sharp, offended scoff cut through the air. He shot Gyu-jin a glare sharp enough to slice before trailing after them.

Gyu-jin stayed frozen for a beat.

Why did Seong-Jun just go along with what he said? Why did he even bother asking?

“I haven’t broken your legs yet, retard. Use them.”

The words came from ahead — tossed over Seong-Jun’s shoulder without even a glance back.

Gyu-jin blinked himself back into motion.

Inhale. Exhale. Keep his steps steady.

It was just a school project. He’d been through worse.

All he had to do was focus. Study. Present.

Simple.

Everything would go well.

He repeated it until the thought scraped raw, turning over and over in his head like a broken record.

★ ☆

The four boys stared at the ***Closed for Maintenance*** **sign** — bold red letters, paint fading, peeling like it had been there for years. It clung crookedly to the library's glass door, almost mocking them.

They stood there for a beat too long, dumbfounded. Almost comical.

"Fuck type of rich pig area can't fix their fucking libraries," Ji-Hoon muttered with an exaggerated sigh, dragging his fingers through his hair.

From the side, Seong-Jun's eyes narrowed into slits. The scoff he gave was short, sharp, and designed to cut.

Ji-Hoon caught it. His hand hovered to his mouth, fake cough, posture straightening in that *alright, fine* kind of way.

"Ah. Forgot you live 'round here," he said with a lazy rock back on his heels, hands in his pockets. "My bad, bro…"

Seong-Jun only rolled his eyes, shrugging like he couldn't care less.

"Whatever. Let's just find somewhere else. Do it another time. We still have, what, two days?"

He pivoted away from the storefront, strolling off like the problem wasn't worth a second thought. His shadow — that loyal, doglike lackey — trailed behind him without question.

Left behind, Woo-Jae jabbed a finger hard into Gyu-Jin's shoulder, dragging him into a whirlpool of grievances.

Up ahead, Ji-Hoon leaned sideways into Seong-Jun, elbow nudging with that sly, testing shove people give before asking for something they know they shouldn't.

"Shouldn't we just do it at your place? I mean, your house is huge. Parents never home, dude."

It was said low, like an easy suggestion, but the tone was deliberate — familiar.

Seong-Jun slowed mid-stride, turning his head just enough to look at Ji-Hoon like he'd just stepped in something foul.

"Bro, I really can't walk anymore — and *that fucker*—" Ji-Hoon jerked his chin back toward Woo-Jae, exhaling as if the thought alone was exhausting.

"He's gonna drive me insane. Let's just finish it today… c'mon, dude…"

Seong-Jun's pace faltered. His eyes slid sideways toward the two boys who weren't exactly hurrying to catch up.

… … …

“If you can’t fight back, then run. Seriously. It’s pathetic,” Woo-Jae said, voice crisp with irritation. “I don’t intend on fighting either, but that doesn’t mean I let people walk all over me because they’re stronger or taller.”

The words landed like a teacher’s reprimand. Woo-Jae’s expression was taut, almost pitying, as if Gyu-Jin had disappointed him on some personal level.

Gyu-Jin’s patience was already running thin. Today had been too much already.

He exhaled, sharp. “Look, if this is about me saying we should go to the public library—it really seemed like a good idea. It had nothing to do with Seong-Jun.”

The snap in his voice was the kind you got when you’d been cornered into defending yourself to a parent.

Woo-Jae scoffed, fingers fussing with his tie like he was trying to physically iron out his annoyance. “Who said anything about Seong-Jun? That was Ji-Hoon’s idea. Does that psycho have you on a leash?”

Seong-Jun couldn’t hear the words. But he saw it.

Gyu-Jin’s breath hitched. His cheeks flamed, the flush climbing up to his ears before he yanked his gaze away.

“…He doesn’t,” he muttered. “Don’t say weird shit…”

Seong-Jun saw it.

Did Gyu-Jin just blush?

Woo-Jae just blinked at him like he was an idiot. *“Is this kid retarded? The nickname makes sense now.”*

“You’re a lost cause, Gyu-Jin.” Woo-Jae’s voice dropped lower, more cutting. “If you don’t want to be dragged around like an injured dog constantly—”

He caught Gyu-Jin by the shoulders, turning him just so, and began fussing with his hair mechanically like he was fixing a broken piece of furniture. “Stop looking so disheveled in their proximity. And mine. I can’t stand stupidity.”

Again, Seong-Jun saw it.

Why the fuck is he touching him like that? They’re close. Too close.

“Sounds good,” Seong-Jun said suddenly to Ji-Hoon, though his gaze wasn’t on him. He didn’t even acknowledge Ji-Hoon’s startled double-take before he was moving — a few strides, and he was there.

Gyu-Jin realized too late. His wrist was seized in a grip that yanked him forward, sending him stumbling until he was standing beside Seong-Jun instead of Woo-Jae.

The hold was unyielding, fingers biting into his skin. He tried to tug free — useless. His chest rose unevenly, the heat from Seong-Jun's palm burning into him.

Seong-Jun looked down at him, eyes scanning like he was memorizing every inch of his face, then — without warning — his hand shifted, fingers threading briefly through Gyu-Jin's hair before ruffling it up hard.

Gyu-Jin jerked back, brows knitting. "S-What the hell—"

"New plans," Seong-Jun cut in, already angling them toward Woo-Jae. "We're starting the project at my house."

"What?!"
"What?!"

Both boys' voices overlapped, one confused, the other bristling.

Seong-Jun's grip tightened. Gyu-Jin flinched, the instinct to pull away written all over him — but he didn't. He stayed.

Seong-Jun's head tilted, mockery sharp in his expression. "Is that a problem?"

Woo-Jae's glare was lethal. "You think I'm walking into some sadistic asshole's house? *Willingly?"*

A short, humorless laugh left Seong-Jun.

"Harsh words. Sadistic asshole?"

The smirk never reached his eyes. Those eyes stayed cold.

Then — he lifted Gyu-Jin's wrist, letting Woo-Jae see.

"Like this?"

In one vicious twist, he forced the joint at an unnatural angle. Pain flared hot and immediate — Gyu-Jin let out a startled, choked sob, his other hand clawing instinctively at Seong-Jun's to break free. No use.

The skin under Seong-Jun's grip flushed angry red.

Still not looking at Gyu-Jin, Seong-Jun dropped the wrist just enough to glare at Woo-Jae — who, for once, looked rattled.

A scoff. A turn of the heel. And Gyu-Jin was dragged along without pause.

“Don’t show if you don’t want to,” Seong-Jun called back, voice deliberately cruel. “It’s your precious grades, right?”

Gyu-Jin glanced over his shoulder, catching Woo-Jae’s baffled stare. He mouthed a silent apology before forcing himself to keep up with Seong-Jun’s longer stride.

“Some fuckin’ leash, alright…” Woo-Jae muttered, adjusting his backpack strap. He followed anyway, Ji-Hoon already ambling along a few paces ahead.

.....

“Ah—Seong-Jun—it hurts… let go.”

No answer.

The burn in his wrist intensified.

“I-I get it… you’re hurting me…”

A sidelong glance. A raised brow. “So what?”

The words landed like a slap.

They walked. In public, it could have looked like hand-holding. The thought hit him — ridiculous, humiliating — and his mind flicked back to being shoved into lockers.

Don’t try to run away from me.

Gyu-Jin stopped abruptly. The jerk in the hold almost pulled Seong-Jun off balance, but the older boy took a deliberate, slow, evidently pissed-off step back into place.

“S-Seong-Jun.” His voice cracked. Eyes low. He drew a breath, steadied it, and lifted his gaze.

“I told you… I won’t run away.” He lifted the restrained wrist slightly between them.

“I don’t care about this.” Breath hitched. “I said I’d stay.”

Seong-Jun hadn’t expected that. He’d expected compliance, silence, fear.

Instead…

His jaw tightened.

Annoyance curled low in his gut — *because it was exactly what he wanted to hear.*

But still…

The smaller boy's fingers trembled under Seong-Jun's, breath uneven, eyes struggling to stay in one place.

Still cornered.
A last attempt at survival.
Still his toy.

He laughed under his breath, cruel and quiet.
"Dramatic fuck. Could've just said please."

And he let go.

Relief washed over Gyu-Jin's face — subtle, but there — and yet he stayed. Walked beside him without the threats, without restraint.

The silence that followed wasn't tense. Wasn't warm either. Just there.

Heavy with something unspoken.

★ ☆

The evening turned out exactly as Gyu-Jin had expected.

Although Seong-Jun and Ji-hoon were there, they barely contributed—scrolling through their phones, snickering at memes, showing each other random girls, throwing out the occasional shallow comment. Zero help. Not a single word about the actual project.

Meanwhile, Gyu-Jin and Woo-Jae sat hunched at the living room table, working until their fingers cramped, until their eyes blurred.

Finally, after hours of typing, Gyu-Jin gave a last click and leaned back, exhaling in relief. The research was finished. The script finalized.

He looked up.

Seong-Jun was sprawled back in his chair, leaning so far it looked like the damn thing would topple over. His long legs stretched out, phone in hand, attention nowhere near the work.

Gyu-Jin bit his lip, hesitation stinging at him before he leaned forward and tapped Seong-Jun's shoulder.

“Mm. What.”

The taller boy didn’t even look up, voice a low mutter, eyes still glued to his screen.

Annoyance curled in Gyu-Jin’s chest. *Why had Seong-Jun even suggested they do the speech together? He never imagined someone like him volunteering for something that required effort. And of course—he ended up doing nothing in the end anyway.*

“…we should practice the speech. You can choose which lines you—”

“How’s your wrist?”

The sudden interruption threw him off. Seong-Jun finally lifted his gaze, straightening in his seat.

Gyu-Jin froze. The question sliced through his annoyance, replaced with confusion.

He shifted, tugging his blazer sleeve lower, hiding the bruise forming along his skin.

“It’s fine. Doesn’t hurt anymore.”
A lie. His wrist ached with every movement. He couldn’t wait to go home, ice it, smother it with ointment and bandages.

Seong-Jun leaned forward onto the table. His words came slow, stretched. “Hm… really…”
Like he’d just been told something ridiculous—something he didn’t buy for a second.

And then—without warning—he reached across the table and grabbed Gyu-Jin’s wrist.

The sudden yank drew a sharp, high-pitched whimper from Gyu-Jin. He jerked back hard, managing to rip his wrist from the older boy’s grasp. This time, Seong-Jun just let him.

He blinked, then—laughed. *Genuine laughter.*

“Right,” he drawled, standing with a smirk he couldn’t suppress. “Doesn’t hurt.”

Heat flushed through Gyu-Jin’s face. He bit the inside of his cheek, turned his gaze downward. “Psycho,” he muttered under his breath.

Too quiet.
Or so he thought.

Seong-Jun strolled toward him. Slow. Deliberate.

“What was that?” His voice dropped low as he leaned over, one hand gripping the back of Gyu-Jin’s chair.

And before Gyu-Jin could react, Seong-Jun spun the chair to face him face to face.

Gyu-Jin’s breath caught. Panic shot through him, eyes flickering desperately around the room. Woo-Jae was buried in his notes, oblivious. Ji-hoon was slumped over, dead asleep.

Relief came.
But only for a beat.

Seong-Jun's hand snapped onto his elbow, yanking him up from the chair with bruising force.

"Follow."

A single command. Not up for debate.
Seong-Jun tilted his chin toward the stairs and shoved his hands into his pockets, strolling away like he had all the time in the world.

Gyu-Jin froze, heart pounding, before scrambling to follow.

He trailed behind Seong-Jun up the stairs.

"Where are we going…?"

"My room." Seong-Jun's tone was flat, casual, too casual. Like bringing Gyu-Jin into his room was completely normal.

The words nearly tripped him. His steps faltered, panic rising fast.

"Your—what—why…?"

Seong-Jun stopped at the door to his room, leaning against the frame with casual ease. His eyes dropped to Gyu-Jin—who stilled, biting his lip, gaze darting everywhere but at him, nervous fingers picking at his own skin. The smirk that curved Seong-Jun's mouth was sharp.

He pushed off the frame in a single stride, leaning down until his face hovered close.
"Are you nervous?"

Gyu-Jin jumped back, body jolting. His chest stuttered with a fake cough, scrambling for composure.

Seong-Jun's lips parted with a sharp puff of air—like he was actually surprised by the flinch.

"Geez." He rolled his eyes, turned the knob, and pushed the door open. "I'm just gonna fix your wrist up."

Gyu-Jin felt like he could finally breathe.
But his body still burned.

For one dizzying second, he'd been sure Seong-Jun was about to do something else—something strange, wrong. Eternal gratitude welled in him that he hadn't questioned it and voiced that thought aloud. His relief didn't last. It crumbled, cracked in half the instant he replayed what Seong-Jun had actually said.

Fix his wrist?

Confusion swept back in, heavier than the relief ever was.

He hesitated. His sneakers shifted against the floor. And then—because hesitating any longer would only make it more awkward, more obvious—he followed Seong-Jun into the room.

The space wasn't surprising. Seong-Jun's room was everything his wasn't: tall walls, wide windows, sleek furniture that looked like it belonged in some expensive catalog. The part that made Gyu-Jin falter was the neatness—books stacked with clinical precision on the desk. Textbooks. Marked with tabs. He couldn't reconcile the sight. Couldn't imagine Seong-Jun putting effort into studying.

The sound of the bed creaking pulled him back. Seong-Jun sat down carelessly, a first aid kit dropping beside him with a soft thud that reverberated in the silence.

Gyu-Jin's feet shifted at the edge of the bed, fingers fidgeting uselessly, like he didn't know what to do with them.

"Didn't know you studied…" he muttered.

Seong-Jun's eyes flicked lazily toward the desk, then back again.
"It's rude to pry, y'know." His hand rummaged in the kit, lazily looking for something, before adding, low, "…fuck-Gyu."

The insult didn't sting. Not really. But with Seong-Jun, you could never tell when the bite was real and when it was just the way he breathed.

"Oh. Sorry… I guess…" The words trailed off into nothing.
Gyu-Jin's focus snagged on the bandages, the ointment, the quiet movements of Seong-Jun's hands as they sorted through supplies. His gut twisted. *No way this is free. Seong-Jun never does anything without wanting something in return.*

He took an instinctive step back.
"It's fine, really. You don't have to…I'll do it at—"

"Take off your blazer."

The command landed flat, sharp, impatient. No teasing curve to his lips, no mockery in his tone. Just authority, plain and heavy. Seong-Jun leaned forward slightly, elbows propped on his knees, gaze pinning him in place.

The air in Gyu-Jin's lungs caught. His chest heaved, heartbeat stumbling into a painful skip.

"W-my blazer? It's just my wrist, I—"

His words tumbled out too quickly, panicked. He fumbled at his sleeve instead, dragging it up clumsily, hands brushing rough against the tender skin of his wrist. His jerky movements made him wince.

"…look…We can just do it like this—"

The sentence cracked apart when Seong-Jun's foot lashed out, swift and precise, sweeping his legs from beneath him.

Gyu-Jin dropped hard onto the mattress, breath jolting from his chest.

"Take it off."
The tone was final. Like he wasn't going to watch the smaller stall any longer.

Slowly, he shifted upright into a cross-legged seat across from Seong-Jun. His mouth opened on instinct—one more protest ready to spill—but nothing came. His voice had abandoned him.

So he obeyed. Fingers clumsy, he slipped the blazer off his shoulders. Laid it aside. His wrist stretched between them, offered. His eyes never dared to rise higher than Seong-Jun's chest.

A smirk curved Seong-Jun's mouth. Victory, quiet but there. His larger hand closed around Gyu-Jin's smaller one—calloused fingers grazing delicately over skin that still stung. His thumb ran slow circles that mocked gentleness.

"You're so much less annoying when you're good for me, hm?"

The words slid under his skin, Gyu-Jin's jaw twitched. He stared fixedly at the contrast—his narrow wrist swallowed in Seong-Jun's grip. His breath came shallow. His brain refused to process how Seong-Jun could be both cruel and careful at the same time.

Seong-Jun didn't need an answer. He saw everything in the twitch of fingers, in the quiver of lips that couldn't form words. He won. Resistance stripped clean.

The ointment stung cold, pulling a shiver down Gyu-Jin's spine. His body screamed to flinch away, but he forced himself still. He fixed his eyes onto the boy working on his wrist. Seong-Jun's face, bent in concentration, looked wrong in this role—too calm, too meticulous. Like he was patching up an injury he hadn't caused in the first place.

Except he had.

A careful blow. A neat bandage. A final pat, deliberate, almost smug. Seong-Jun leaned back to admire the work as though it were art. Then his gaze slid up, darker, expectant.

A lump clogged Gyu-Jin's throat. His tongue felt heavy, thick. He knew—this was where he should say it. *Thank you.* But the words refused. His pride clogged them, his hesitance strangled them.

Seong-Jun's jaw clenched. The silence clawed at him. Annoyance curled sharp in his chest. He'd been gentle, deliberate. And Gyu-Jin sat there like it didn't matter. Like *he* didn't matter.

Something inside snapped.

"A 'thank you' would've fuckin' been nice."

The movement was vicious. He snatched the boy's wrist again, grip like iron, jerking him forward in a single brutal pull. Pain lit through his body, but the motion was too fast to even

notice it. Suddenly, Gyu-Jin was sprawled half-on top of him, hands and knees pressed against the bed. Seong-Jun leaned against the headboard, eyes blazing.

Gyu-Jin recognized Seong-Jun's emotions by now—the jealousy, annoyance—but this, this was twisted into something darker. *Hungry. Starved.*

"Mm. Doesn't feel right like this," Seong-Jun murmured, tone flat, too casual, like narrating a thought he'd always carried.

In a heartbeat, he flipped him.

Gyu-Jin hit the mattress with a muffled gasp, wrists seized and slammed down beside his head, pinned. He bucked instinctively, breath fracturing.

"W-what the fu—Seong-Jun, what are you…"

His voice cracked, thin and trembling.

Seong-Jun's eyes flickered to the fresh bandage struggling more than the other under the grip. He blinked. Then suddenly—he pressed harder, crueler, grinding into the bruised flesh until a broken high-pitched sob tore from Gyu-Jin's throat. His body twisted under Seong-Jun's grasp, eyelashes damp, face hot and flushed, hair mussed against the sheets, tilting his head to the side.

Cute.

Seong-Jun's exhale was sharp, near a growl. He leaned down, his breath ghosting the boy's neck, hot against bared skin. Gyu-Jin's chest heaved under him, pulse frantic. With his head tilted to the side his throat lay open, vulnerable, begging.

So fucking cute.

Closer. His mouth hovered by the soft skin of his nape. Gyu-Jin froze, burning from the inside out, brain screaming to fight, to kick, to scream. But his body betrayed him—stilled, weak, pliant.

Seong-Jun blinked at the sudden slackening. Felt it—the way the boy stopped struggling, gave in.

His lips ghosted Gyu-Jin's ear. His voice dropped, hoarse, almost coaxing.

"Gyu-Jin, y'know I've been wondering…" A pause, deliberate, a slow smile curling in his tone.

"If I forced my dick inside you—would your whimpers sound the same as when I hurt you? *Or worse?*"
His breath deepened.
"Would they sound more *pathetic?* More *needy?*"

Gyu-Jin's breath hitched. Heat scorched through his gut, straight down to where he couldn't bear to think about. Shame crawling up his throat, flooding his chest. He wanted to vanish. But another thought burned alongside it, vicious and unshakable: Seong-Jun's hands, careful with the bandage. The promise he'd spat before—*I won't run, I'll stay.* A curse masquerading as a vow.

A shaky breath left him. His head tilted just enough to meet Seong-Jun's gaze. His voice cracked, fragile.

"My wrists… I won't run—I promise. It just… hurts…"

Seong-Jun hummed, contemplative, gaze dragging leisurely down from trembling jaw to collarbone to chest.

"Hm. Don't think so. I like you better like this."

His knee slid between Gyu-Jin's legs, slow, deliberate. Testing. Watching every twitch, every shiver.

Gyu-Jin's thighs clamped instinctively, but Seong-Jun's strength forced them apart again with insulting ease. Kept him open. Vulnerable.

"…wait—Seong-Jun…" The whisper was so faint it should've gone unheard. But Seong-Jun never missed a thing.

The heat broke with the slam of the door.

"Do any of you know where that imbecile Ji-Hoon lives? He's even more insufferable when he's half asleep, seriously acting like a complete—"

Woo-Jae froze. His words died, expression flat, unreadable.

Seong-Jun didn't move. Didn't flinch. He looked over, expression bored, like Woo-Jae had asked the time.

"Busy. That big brain of yours not know what knocking is? Fuck off."

Gyu-Jin bit down hard on his lip.
Remembering what Woo-Jae had said earlier.

Does that psycho have you on a leash?

He swallowed.
He felt the way Seong-Jun's grip loosened when the door opened. He took the opportunity. In a split second—Gyu-Jin twisted, scrambled free.

"W-we're not—my mom's probably worried—"

He bolted, fleeing past Woo-Jae in a blur.

Silence lingered.

Then Seong-Jun *laughed*—laughed as if this was the funniest thing in the world. He reclined back against the headboard, pulling out his phone like nothing happened.

“That was fucking funny.”

Woo-Jae’s eyes narrowed, disbelief etched in every line of his face.

“You really are a fucking lunatic.” He dusted at his shirt, muttering like he’d been contaminated. “That leash is more of a damn cage…” He turned to go.

Seong-Jun’s voice cut, low and cold, making him pause in his tracks.

“Watch your mouth. You’re lucky you’ve got to stand in front of the class for this stupid presentation. Otherwise I’d have smashed your face in the second your shitty attitude started.”

He didn’t even look up as he spoke. Just scrolled. As if the threat was empty, offhand, casual. But everyone knew his threats never were.

Woo-Jae froze, visibly rattled. His mouth opened—words ready, sharp—but he swallowed them back, a frustrated puff left his throat. He turned and stormed out.

The room sank colder.

Seong-Jun’s thumb slowed against his phone screen. Thoughts gnawed in silence.

A laugh, hollow, broke free.
“Bullshit promise to stay.”
His grin twisted, cruel, sharp at the edges.
“Fuck-Gyu. You really are pathetic up until the end…”

But the smile slipped. His jaw tightened.

“…but you should learn not to break promises.”

The hallways buzzed with too much chatter. Too many bodies pressing past, too many voices crashing together—laughter, shouting, the shrill echo of someone calling to a friend.

It felt like chaos.

And yet, through the mess of sound and movement, Gyu-jin couldn’t shake the weight of invisible eyes. Nobody was looking at him—he knew that—but it felt like they were. Like Seong-Jun had said something. Like the walls themselves were whispering about the previous evening.

He knew Seong-Jun would be pissed. He knew retaliation was inevitable.

For a moment, he'd felt the urge to apologize. To swallow down the knot in his throat and say sorry for breaking his promise. But the impulse burned out quickly.

Why should he apologize? Seong-Jun was the one who cornered him without warning. Dragged him into something he hadn't asked for. Why was he the one who should carry that weight?

But the thought didn't hold. Doubts crept in, sharp and poisonous.

Because he hadn't been uncomfortable. Not really. What happened had only gone wrong when Woo-Jae walked in. That was when panic had clawed its way up his throat. But before that—*he would've let him.*

That was what haunted him most. The truth of it. The shame of it. The way his body had almost said yes when his mind couldn't.

He couldn't face him. Not after that.

The rest of the day blurred into a haze of tension and avoidance. Stress curled itself into every breath, but at least it kept him sharp, on edge. He skipped classes, hid in the bathroom during lunch, ducked behind corners when he caught the sound of Seong-Jun's lackeys barking their ugly laughter down the hall. It was like playing a rigged game of cat and mouse, except the cat was patient and the mouse was already bleeding.

When the final bell shrieked through the building—splitting the air like some holy savior—students shot out of their chairs in a clatter of scraping metal and loud chatter. Phones were snatched back from the front desk, friends flocked together in noisy groups, and for once, Gyu-jin was the first out the door.

For once, he won. He'd avoided Seong-Jun all day.

He didn't walk home. He didn't dare. Instead, he took the bus, curling tight into his seat, tapping his foot with every stop as his chest clenched at the thought of who might climb aboard. Each door hiss felt like a countdown, but nobody dangerous appeared.

Somehow, he made it home unscathed.

His bag hit the floor the second he stepped into his room, and he collapsed onto his bed with a long, exhausted sigh.

They'd never practiced the oral. Tomorrow's presentation was going to be a disaster. No doubt about it.

Still—his thoughts circled, unwilling to settle. It might go better if Seong-Jun had cue cards. Something simple to lean on. Not for Seong-Jun's sake. No. For the grade. For survival.

That was the logic he clung to, because it was the only one he wanted to believe.

So he gave him the easiest parts.

The pen scratched across the desk, steady until the last line was finished. His hand ached.

The cue cards were neat, numbered, color-coded. Key lines highlighted in sharp fluorescent strokes—enough that even someone half-paying attention could coast through.

He should've felt relief. Pride, even. Instead, the satisfaction curdled the moment it touched him.

Why?

Why had he put this much effort into helping Seong-Jun, of all people? The very person who made practice impossible in the first place?

The thought left a sour taste. He cursed himself under his breath, teeth clenched.

"Whatever," he muttered, the word slipping out more like a dragged-out sigh than actual speech.

The cards went into a small plastic case. He labeled it neatly in black ink—*Seong-Jun's cards*—and set it on his desk so he wouldn't forget them tomorrow.

The label stared back at him like a quiet betrayal.

The day of the presentation finally arrived.

Gyu-jin drifted down the hallway like a man headed for execution, his chest tight with every step. Half of him was ready to turn back. Pretend he was sick. Skip the whole day. But the other half knew that would only make it worse. Better to see Seong-Jun now—get it over with—than have their first words since that evening happen in front of the class.

Seong-Jun, of course, wasn't hard to find.
He never was.

He and his pack of idiots stood in the middle of the hallway like they owned it. Blocking the path, leaning against the lockers, spitting too-loud laughter that grated against everyone forced to squeeze around them. They didn't move. They didn't care. If anything, it looked like they enjoyed watching other students grit their teeth and mutter under their breath as they pushed through.

The kind of cruelty that was casual. Automatic.
Gyu-jin stopped. Hesitated. He could feel his pulse in his throat.

Just hand him the cards and leave. That's all.

He forced himself forward. None of them even looked at him. Not until he reached out, tentative, tapping lightly against Seong-Jun's arm.
"Uhm… Seong-Jun…"

The taller boy turned his head—slow, deliberate—like he'd just been interrupted from something more important. His eyes locked on Gyu-jin, and instantly his expression shifted.

The corners of his mouth curled into a grin too sharp to be friendly.

"Fuck-Gyu," he drawled, voice dripping with mock delight, far too loud.

"Thought you were avoiding me. Real hurtful, y'know. I almost thought I'd have to hunt you down…" He pushed himself off the locker with lazy menace, stepping closer.

"But looks like you came crawling on your own. So—fuck do you want?"

The weight of his presence pressed down hard, and Gyu-jin instinctively took a step back, putting air between them. He cleared his throat, trying to steady himself.

"…I wasn't avoiding you, I just—" His words faltered, catching on the knot in his chest. He swallowed, *he just needed to get to the point.*

"I made you some cue cards… because we didn't really get to practice the oral together."

His voice dipped at the last bit, quieter. He pulled the plastic case from his bag—the one labeled with neat black marker: ***Seong-Jun's cards.***
He held it out like a peace offering.

Seong-Jun stared, unblinking, before finally taking the case. His fingers dragged slow against Gyu-jin's hand, deliberate.

He looked down at the cards, flipping the case over, catching on the neat handwriting, the label with his name.

Then he scoffed. The sound cut sharp.

When his gaze lifted again, Gyu-jin was already inching to leave, waiting for something—some confirmation that Seong-Jun wasn't furious.

"I hope you're not expecting a 'thank you,'" Seong-Jun murmured, stepping closer again, invading the space Gyu-jin tried to reclaim.

He leaned down until his voice was hot against Gyu-jin's ear. "Because I don't recall getting one either. Do you?"

His expression was faux-innocent, as if they were discussing something trivial.

But the meaning was clear. Too clear.
Gyu-jin's face cracked, the panic visible.

And Seong-Jun's smile stretched into something cruel.
His brow furrowed, like he was pretending to think hard. "If I remember right, you were pretty—"

Gyu-jin's hand flew up, covering his mouth before the words could finish. His pulse spiked, body moving on impulse.

Seong-Jun froze only for a beat. Then, slowly, his brow arched. That smirk twitched under Gyu-jin's palm, amused. He lifted his own hand, curling easily around Gyu-jin's wrist. His grip was iron. Deliberate. He peeled the smaller boy's hand off his face, slow, savoring the resistance, before dropping it away like it weighed nothing.

The glare that followed was sharp enough to pierce. He held it, unflinching, until the tremor of Gyu-jin's bottom lip gave him away.

Then Seong-Jun chuckled under his breath. Low, sharp, cutting.
"Forget it."

His eyes narrowed. Chin jerked toward the classroom in a dismissive tilt.

"Fuck off already."

Gyu-jin didn't linger. He spun on his heel and hurried off, muttering a quiet, shaky "*okay, bye then,"* not caring if it was heard.

Seong-Jun watched him scurry down the hall. Then, with a shrug, he leaned casually against the locker again and flicked the case open.

"Fuck-Gyu's real fucking weird," Min-hyuk's voice cut in, ignorant, cocky and loud. "Tch. He's in our grade too, right? That freak's so short he might as well be a fucking girl."

Ji-hoon nodded in agreement. "Ah. Don't you think he looks a bit like one too?"

Min-hyuk lit up, like Ji-hoon had just handed him a gift. "Dude! He fucking does—"

"He whimpers like a girl too," Seong-Jun interrupted flatly. He didn't even look up, still flicking through the cue cards with idle fingers. His tone was casual, but the words landed heavy.

Both Min-hyuk and Ji-hoon went silent. Their heads snapped toward him, then to each other.

"Huh?!"
"Huh?!"

The reaction almost in unison. But Seong-Jun didn't acknowledge it. Maybe he didn't hear. Maybe he didn't care. He was absorbed in the neat handwriting, the color-coded highlights, the stupid little arrows and underlines.

“This idiot really did put a lot of effort into this shit…” he murmured, tilting his head, smirk flickering at the edge of his mouth. “Aw. Almost makes me feel bad.”

He shoved the cards back into the case without care, snapping it shut like it was trash, before turning his eyes on Ji-hoon.

“Ji-hoon. Make sure Woo-Jae doesn’t do shit during the presentation. He doesn’t know anything, yeah?”

Ji-hoon snorted, grinning. “Tch. Obviously. That fucking dork would’ve reported us to the disciplinary council before we could even start the presentation.”

Seong-Jun hummed, satisfied.

Min-hyuk, still clueless, huffed and shoved himself between them like he was missing the punchline of a joke. “Yah. Who the hell is Woo-Jae?”

Ji-hoon shot him a look like he’d been waiting for the chance to complain, and the floodgates opened—gripes, curses, death wishes all spilling out about the boy who got under his skin more than anyone ever had. Min-hyuk clung to every word like gospel, soaking it in with wild-eyed energy.

And Seong-Jun leaned back again, cue cards in his pocket, bit his lip, *cruel excitement played at his mind.*

★ ☆

“Okay, quiet down. It’s time for the next group up… group 4.”

“Park Gyu-jin.
Seo Woo-Jae.
Lee Ji-hoon.
Kang Seong-jun.”

The four boys rose from their seats, scraping chairs against the tile, heading to the front of the class.

Gyu-jin and Seong-Jun took the lead while Ji-hoon and Woo-Jae moved behind the desk, fumbling with the USB, connecting the visuals to the projector.

Gyu-jin started.
The topic: ethics and morality. His voice came out smoother than he felt inside—steady, measured, purposeful. He forced himself into that posture of composure, shoulders squared, eyes sharp when needed, gestures precise. His grades were his lifeline, his ticket out. College,

job, a chance to keep his mother afloat. He couldn't afford failure, so he spoke like the project mattered more than his own skin.

When his piece ended, he gestured with a polite tilt, professional, like he'd practiced it a hundred times.

"…and the next member of our group, Seong-Jun, will carry on from here."

Gyu-jin braced.

Seong-Jun's part was supposed to be quick, easy, forgettable. But he hadn't stopped watching Gyu-jin for the entire presentation. Not glaring—worse. His eyes lingered, dissecting him like a specimen, catching every twitch, every controlled breath. It was like being graded by Seong-Jun himself.

Now, when his turn came, Seong-Jun let his gaze slide from Gyu-jin with deliberate slowness, an eyebrow cocked. His lip twitched like he was swallowing back a laugh. He stepped forward once, deliberate, heel landing like a gunshot in the silence.

He barely glanced at the cue-cards before tossing them aside, the neat case clattering onto the desk behind him. The smirk hummed low in his throat.

Gyu-jin's stomach turned.

What the fuck is he doing?

His grip on composure faltered for a beat, before he wrestled it back down.

"You see, my fellow students," Seong-Jun began, clasping his hands together like some smug preacher. His grin cut sharp across his face. "Morality is subjective. Everyone has morals—different morals. Even if you think you don't, that's still a moral stance. Being anti-moral is a moral in itself."

The room was listening. Watching. And all Gyu-jin could feel was confusion crawling under his skin. Did Seong-Jun actually have something prepared already? Something that actually somewhat made sense? He didn't know if he should feel relieved or concerned.

"But there are some set morals. Ones that are almost impossible to disagree with. Honesty. Fairness. Loyalty."

His head tilted toward Gyu-jin.
"Gyu-jin, what about you? You agree with these, hm?"

The question hit like a spotlight. Gyu-jin's heart jolted. He froze for half a breath, wishing now more than ever that they had actually practiced this beforehand.

"Ah… yes. Yes, these are quite hard to argue against."

Seong-Jun's grin widened, sharp enough to cut. He turned back toward the class, his hand dropping onto Gyu-jin's shoulder—too heavy, too sudden, more slap than touch. The pressure

forced his spine rigid. Every nerve screamed at him to shove it off, but he didn't move.

"Mhm. My dear friend Gyu-jin values these morals…" his eyes flicked down at him, "…very much."

He let go only to prowl across the front of the classroom, pacing like a lion that already knew the cage door was open.

"But you see," he drawled, "Gyu-jin and I… we have more of a pet and owner relationship."

Gyu-jin's chest tightened. His lungs refused air.

What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck is he doing.

That careful composure shattered at the edges. His hands dug into the side of the desk just to stay grounded.

Seong-Jun stopped pacing, clapped once, sharp as a whip crack. His narrowed eyes gleamed like he was about to tell a joke only he thought was funny.

"So we've decided to give a physical demonstration of what these morals mean."

Gyu-jin's blood ran cold.

"One of the biggest instincts a pet has is loyalty. And if a pet fails to show absolute loyalty to its owner…"

He paused, gaze slicing from the class to Gyu-jin—taunting, private, a warning no one else understood.

"…don't you think it should be punished?"

The classroom fractured. Some students leaned forward, hungry for spectacle. Majority laughed, nodding eagerly. Others shifted uncomfortably, eyes darting, whispering "no."

Seong-Jun didn't let that breathe.

A sudden bang ripped through the room—a violent kick against the front desk. The wood shuddered, the sound sharp enough to rattle bones. Gyu-jin snapped his head back in time to see Ji-hoon's grin, one of Woo-Jae's fingers bent backwards at a grotesque angle behind the laptop. A warning. A restraint. Woo-Jae's wide eyes brimmed with apology, but he didn't move. Couldn't.

The class fell in line instantly. The quiet dissenters flipped, now nodding yes like their lives depended on it.

Seong-Jun hummed, satisfied.

"That's enough." The teacher finally stood, voice taut with false authority as he slammed his palm against his desk. "Seong-Jun, I will not allow violence in my class."

The room froze.

Seong-Jun turned his head slowly, boredom etched across his face. His eyes narrowed, calculating. Then his voice came, smooth, low, venomous.

“Your daughter in hospital… Yoo-Ri, wasn’t it?” He tilted his head, deliberately condescending.

“It’d be difficult for her if you suddenly lost your job, wouldn’t it? Right, sir?”

The teacher’s face drained of blood. He hesitated, then caved, shamefully, cowardly bowing his head. “Yes—yes. A physical representation is… fine. Carry on.”

Gyu-jin felt nothing but disgust. But he wasn’t surprised, wasn’t expecting an intervention. He’d filed complaints, begged for intervention. But nobody cared. Nobody *ever* cared. They were all cowards—spineless bastards who’d sacrifice every student here to protect their paychecks.

Seong-Jun’s smirk returned, sharp with victory. He turned back to the class, then flicked his eyes to the clock.

“Ah, would you look at the time? Class is almost over.”

Relief swelled in Gyu-jin’s chest for a fleeting second. Maybe he’d get out. Maybe it would end here.

But with Seong-Jun, it never ended.

He stepped like he was leaving, then twisted mid-stride—faster than thought.

A brutal fist slammed into Gyu-jin’s stomach. The air exploded out of his lungs in a strangled gasp. His body folded, coughing violently, vision blotched with white-hot pain.

Before he could even double over fully, Seong-Jun’s hand fisted into his hair, yanking him upright with merciless force. His scalp screamed. His body trembled.

Seong-Jun patted his shoulder, mock-gentle, voice slick.
“Didn’t hurt too bad, right?”

Gyu-jin glared, venomous, refusing to drop. He’d taken hits before. He’d survive this one too. But then—something small slipped into his palm.

A note.

He dropped his eyes just enough to see the scrawled words:

I told you not to piss me off, Fuck-Gyu.

His stomach churned. His glare snapped back up at Seong-Jun—burning, helpless.

The class erupted in cheers. Clapping, laughter, jeers. Like it was a circus, like Gyu-jin's pain was worth the ticket.

The bell rang in chorus with their applause.
It was too much. Pain, rage, embarrassment, disgust—all colliding, overwhelming. But through it all, one thought rose above everything else, carved into him like a brand.

Kang Seong-Jun.

Seong-Jun.
Seong-Jun.
Seong-Jun.

Fucking piece of shit.

Seong-Jun and his lackeys strolled into the bathroom when lunch hit. The place always smelled faintly of bleach and mildew, but it was their hideout. Their sanctuary. They came here every day to smoke, away from the teachers' nagging voices and sharp eyes.

They cracked a few lazy jokes. Nodded while one of the boys told some dumb story that didn't land. Laughter echoed against the tiled walls, thin and hollow.

Seong-Jun slipped a cigarette between his lips, lighter already in hand. His jaw shifted as the flame sparked—

—and then blinked when the cigarette was knocked clean out of his mouth by a scrunched-up piece of paper.

The sound of it hitting the tile was sharp, louder than it should've been.

The others whipped around fast.

"Yah! What the fuck do you think you're doing?!"

"Who the hell do you think you are, you little—"

A fist cocked back, knuckles white and ready. Gyu-jin didn't flinch. *Not an inch.*

But the fist never landed. Seong-Jun's hand caught his friend's wrist mid-swing, grip iron-tight. His jaw ticked once, then he let go, almost bored.

"Everyone leave."

The command cut through the room. No arguments. No second chances.

Offended scoffs and muttered curses filled the air, the lackeys brushing past Gyu-jin with sharp shoulders and narrowed glares. But his eyes didn't waver, didn't once leave Seong-Jun.

When the heavy bathroom door shut with a metallic slice through the silence, Seong-Jun moved. Slow, deliberate steps toward Gyu-jin, who stood like he was trying to hold back a storm inside his chest.

"You don't look too happy right now, Gyu-jin…"

His voice dropped, dragging low as his eyes locked onto his. Eyebrows pulled together in a mock concern that didn't reach his mouth.
"Is it because of me?"

The shove came fast. Gyu-jin's palm against his chest, pushing him back. He stepped back himself, breathing sharp.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" His words snapped like a whip. Not loud, not quiet either —burning in the space between restraint and fury. He didn't want attention drawn in, but his voice carried a raw heat.

"Why are you doing this to me? You said that in front of the whole class. I'm not a fucking pet. We're not friends…" His voice thinned, stilled, something fragile and heavy weighing down on it. "*We aren't anything*… I don't owe you any loyalty. So stop acting like I do. Seriously… You're—"

Fingers slid into his hair. Slow. Careless. Mocking. Like stroking down an animal bristling with anger, trying to tame him with the gentlest cruelty.

"*You're* the one who broke your promise…" Seong-Jun's tone coiled around him, invasive and steady. "You knew I'd be mad, so why are you so angry?"

A shaky breath left Gyu-jin, sounding more like defeat than rage. A sigh, almost. He knew it was true—his fault. He knew Seong-Jun would be mad. He'd expected it. He shouldn't have been angry. But Seong-Jun had crossed the line, humiliated him in front of everyone.

His hand came up slowly, swiping the other's fingers out of his hair. His eyes stayed glued to the floor, throat tight.

"It was a… stupid promise."
And he knew—knew—Seong-Jun would try to touch him again. So he didn't give him the chance.

Gyu-jin stormed out, the door crashing shut behind him like a burst of wind funneling through the room.

He's so upset. So fucking cute.

Seong-Jun didn't chase. Didn't laugh, didn't sneer the way he normally would. He only leaned back against the cold tile wall, the usual smug tilt gone from his posture. His head dropped forward, shadow cutting across his face.

Not sulking. Not pissed off either.

Almost… *impressed.*

He tilted his chin up after a long beat, teeth sinking briefly into his bottom lip before he scoffed.

“Puppy learned how to bark, I guess.” His voice lingered, rough with amusement. Then quieter, like he was stitching the words into his own thoughts.

“Park Gyu-jin…” His lips curved, sharp and slow. “…playing with him is going to be a lot more fun now.”

The rising sun stabbed at Gyu-Jin’s eyes, worse than any alarm could’ve.

He hadn’t slept much. His night was restless—thoughts swarming, clawing, refusing to quiet.

He felt so stupid.
Stupid for putting effort into helping Seong-Jun.
Stupid for breaking his promise.
Stupid for expecting Seong-Jun to act normal, as if a deck of cards could smooth over that psycho’s rage.

With a groan, he rolled over and buried his face into the pillow.

The blankets clung to him like armor, a flimsy, suffocating shield he wasn’t ready to crawl out of.

He wished he could stay like this.
Stay home. Never have to see Seong-Jun again.
He was done playing whatever twisted game Seong-Jun had pulled him into.

His gut feelings had been screaming at him since the start—and he never listened. Because if he did what he wanted, only violence would follow. And violence… Seong-Jun always had him wrapped so tight around his finger, violence was almost inevitable.

He needed a break.
Every logical thought in his head was begging him for one.
Even just a day.
No school. No Seong-Jun.

Dragging himself upright, Gyu-Jin sat on the edge of the bed and shoved shaky fingers through his hair. His straight, soft strands were sticking every which way from the pillow, but he didn’t care.

He didn't get up.

For once, he listened. He listened to that tiny, logical part of his brain he'd buried for so long.

He crawled back into the cocoon of blankets and sighed.

Just for a day.
He'd get just one day of a break.

. . . . . .

That one day stretched into two. Then three. Then nearly a week.

His mom let him stay home—he told her he was sick, too weak to make it to class without fainting or puking. She bought it. Made him soup she thought would help, slipped him medicine "just in case." He even helped her around the restaurant in between pretending to rest.

He should've felt better. He finally got the break he needed.
But instead, something gnawed at him.
Something was missing.

Last time he skipped school because of Seong-Jun, his phone never shut up. Non-stop calls. Non-stop texts. Threats stacked on threats, blowing up his notifications until he couldn't breathe.

This time? Nothing. Not a single call. Not a single text.

It was clear enough.
None of this… had ever meant anything.

And Seong-Jun had left him alone.

He told himself it was better that way.
Things would go back to normal.
Seong-Jun would stop treating him like some pet he could order around.

But even now—even before things between them had shifted into whatever this mess was—this didn't feel like normal.

Normal should've been Seong-Jun flooding his phone with threats, blowing it up with calls until Gyu-Jin caved.

So why wasn't he?

The question sat heavy in his chest. He wanted it to stop—the bullying, the constant torment—and now it had. It should've been a relief. But instead, it left him feeling worse. Heavier. Like he'd broken something beyond repair.

What even was normal to him anymore?
Was it Seong-Jun's torment?
Was it laughing half-heartedly with Young-Dong?
Was it helping his mom close up the restaurant every night?

Nothing felt normal. Nothing made sense.

He wished he never had to go back to school. Maybe then he could forget about all this. Forget about Seong-Jun. Pretend it never happened.

But the thought that stung the sharpest was the one that wouldn't leave:

Seong-Jun hadn't called.
Hadn't reached out.

What if he didn't want to fix anything?
What if he was just done with Gyu-Jin—bored, finished, moving on?
Or worse, what if he was angry? Silent in that kind of way that meant there was no coming back?

Gyu-Jin hated himself for it, but the thoughts kept chewing him raw. *He needed to see Seong-Jun again.*

There was only one day left in the week.

Perfect timing.
If it went badly, the weekend would cushion the blow, give him distance.
If it went well—if it somehow smoothed over—then the weekend would feel lighter.

★ ☆

The cafeteria was loud—obnoxiously so.

Seong-Jun sat slouched at the table, his friends crowded around him, their laughter too brash, their voices bouncing off the walls like they owned the place.

"Dude, by the way, where's that dog of yours? Haven't seen him since he gave you those retarded cards," Min-Hyuk asked, speaking through a mouth half-stuffed with rice. He looked ridiculous, crumbs sticking to his lips, but he didn't care.

Seong-Jun only leaned back slightly, like the question tugged at the back of his mind. He tapped his fingers against the table once, a lazy, careless rhythm.

“He’s sulking right now.”

That earned a roar of laughter from the others, the kind that made heads turn at nearby tables. But Seong-Jun didn’t join them. His expression didn’t shift. The sharp amusement in his eyes was muted, like the whole thing bored him more than it entertained.

“Sooo… you’re just gonna let him hide?”

Seong-Jun leaned forward this time, elbows on the desk, the kind of casual posture that carried weight. Calm. Untouchable. As though none of it fazed him—but the lack of spark in his tone made it clear this wasn’t fun anymore.

“Mm. Haven’t spoken to him once. I want him to crawl back on his own.”

The boys latched onto this like it was some kind of genius strategy, their eyes glinting with interest, their nods exaggerated. They echoed their approval with obnoxious “oooos,” like a pack of hyenas circling.

“So—so… what if he doesn’t show? Like, what if the kid just transfers?”

The question barely scratched him. Seong-Jun just rolled a shrug, smooth and dismissive, his jaw tilted in quiet certainty—as if he’d already predicted every possible outcome, and none of it mattered.

“I know he’ll come back. Always does.”

His fork turned idly between his fingers, the metal scraping softly against the tray, his attention flicking to his food as though even this conversation was beneath him.

“A dog can run away,” he murmured, voice sharp enough to cut through the cafeteria noise, “but it’ll always return to its owner when it’s hurt.”

The next day, Gyu-jin made up his mind.

He would go after school. Not during classes, not in uniform, not where eyes could watch and whisper. Just show up at the gates once the day was done, wait for Seong-Jun, and—what? Talk? Apologize? Beg? He didn’t know.

The words would come, he told himself, if he could just see him.

By three o'clock he had pulled himself together. A plain grey shirt, a hoodie just a little too big hanging loose on his frame, jeans, and scuffed white sneakers. Nothing special.

Nothing that said he cared too much.

If he didn't catch Seong-Jun, then fine. He'd leave. He wasn't going to stand around looking desperate, looking like a kicked dog trying to nose its way back.

At least… that's what he told himself.

Phone shoved in his pocket, he set off.

When he arrived at the gates, nobody noticed him. They never did. Gyu-jin could've been a ghost lingering at the edges of the crowd. The only time people had ever turned their eyes on him was because of Seong-Jun—and even then, it wasn't for him, it was to gauge Seong-Jun's mood. He wondered, not for the first time, if people avoided him just to avoid getting tangled in Seong-Jun's shadow. It was like his existence carried consequences that weren't even his own.

But that's when he saw it.

Gyu-jin hadn't meant to stop in his tracks.
It just happened.

Outside the school gates, Seong-Jun was leaning against the hood of his car, and a girl was in his arms—clinging to him like they'd known each other forever. Her face was pressed to his shoulder, his hand loose at her back.

They looked… close. *Too close.*

Something twisted in Gyu-jin's chest. It was a strange, unfamiliar weight—not quite anger, not quite sadness, but something that sat uncomfortably heavy.

Had Seong-Jun really been like this with everyone?
Was Gyu-jin just… a passing amusement?
Was he really just… a toy?

He didn't know, and not knowing burned worse than if he had.

He tore his eyes away before they could sting, turning on his heel and walking off, sighing deep into the collar of his jacket.

What he didn't see—what he couldn't see—was Seong-Jun pushing the girl back with an irritated scoff.
"Yah. What the hell? Stop hanging off me—people will get the wrong idea."

The warmth on his face vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

The girl rolled her eyes, posture shifting from faux-sweet to businesslike in a blink.
"Relax. I just needed to talk to you. Uncle needs money again."

★ ☆

Gyu-jin didn't hear any of that.

Instead, his feet carried him without thought to the small ramen shop—the one where he and Seong-Jun had once ended up alone, bowls steaming between them. It felt… safer there.

Or maybe just familiar.

The bell above the door chimed softly as he stepped inside. He slid into a corner booth, letting the weight in his chest settle.

"Hey, stranger."

He looked up. The boy from karaoke night was standing there, all sunshine and teasing smiles.

"Oh—" Gyu-jin blinked, caught off guard. "I haven't seen you around lately."

The golden retriever-like boy's grin widened, as though they were sharing some inside joke.

"Mm, well… your crazy boyfriend told me he'd break my fingers if I talked to you again."

Gyu-jin nearly choked on his own breath. "Wh—"

"What?" The boy tilted his head, feigning innocence before chuckling under his breath.

"…My boyfriend?"

"Mhm. That guy—Seong Jun." the boy's eyes glinted in amusement.

"Ah, it's a shame." He leaned forward, tapping Gyu-jin lightly on the nose. "You're pretty cute for a guy."

Gyu-jin froze. A strange flutter jolted through him, and heat crept up his neck before he could stop it.

"…Oh. Thank you…"

The boy laughed softly, the sound warm enough to melt butter.

"What? Was that weird to say?"

"N-No, I just…" He shook his head quickly, desperate to steer the conversation somewhere else.

“It’s not like that… between me and Seong Jun, it’s…” His words trailed. He didn’t even know what they were. Not friends, not lovers, not… anything that made sense.

“…Your name,” he blurted. “I don’t even know your name. I’ve been meaning to ask.”

The boy blinked, clearly amused at the sudden pivot. Then he smiled.

“Tae-min.” He leaned on the table with both elbows, still watching Gyu-jin like he was the most interesting thing in the room.

“Ah… I’m Gyu-jin.”

“Well obviously I know that.”

They both laughed—*his laugh warm and unassuming, the kind of sound that pulled people in without warning.*

“You gonna eat?” Tae-min asked, glancing at the menu.

Gyu-jin’s smile faltered. *Why did he even come here.* Eating here… eating here meant remembering Seong Jun. And remembering Seong Jun meant remembering *everything he didn’t want to.*

His gaze drifted.

Tae-min tilted his head, then shrugged like it was nothing and got up from his seat. “I’ll grab us some water,” he called over his shoulder.

By the time Gyu-jin processed it, he was already at the counter.

When Tae-min came back, he slid the glass across the table. Gyu-jin took it with shaky fingers—his throat felt parched anyway—and drank in quick, greedy gulps until it was gone.

“Geez,” Tae-min teased, eyebrows raised. “If compliments make you this nervous, I wonder what else does.”

The words made Gyu-jin flush hotter. But this wasn’t just heat—it was too much.

Too hot.

The edges of his vision blurred. The room tilted.

He pushed himself to his feet, mumbling, “I—I need the bathroom—” but stumbled almost immediately.

Tae-min was on him in an instant, hands steady at his arms. “Gyu-jin! You okay?”

“I’m fine, I just—bathroom—” He shook him off, raking a trembling hand through his hair, but the ground swayed again.

This time, Tae-min didn't let go. He slung Gyu-jin's arm over his shoulder, supporting his body with surprising ease. His expression was the same open, concerned look as always.

But something in his eyes wasn't.

★ ☆

The bathroom was quiet, the hum of the ramen shop muffled behind the door.

Tae-min guided him into a stall and let him drop onto the seat.

"…I'm not feeling well," Gyu-jin breathed, dragging a shaky hand through his hair. "I think… I'll go home…"

Tae-min hummed, closing the stall door with a soft click. He stepped forward, running his fingers lazily through Gyu-jin's hair like he was calming a pet.

"You know… I didn't really see you this way at first. I actually wanted to help you. Kinda liked being the good guy here."

He wasn't even looking directly at him—just tracing idle patterns from Gyu-jin's hair to his temple, speaking as though telling a bedtime story.

"But that guy… what he said…" A faint, almost imperceptible edge entered his tone. "…He's got a big ego, doesn't he? I waited for you to be alone, but—" his voice dropped, annoyance curling in the words "—he was always fucking there."

Gyu-jin's pulse kicked up.

"Say, Gyu-jin-ah… he doesn't like when people touch his toys, huh? So…" Tae-min smiled, all warmth and dimples, "…what if I broke his toy? You think he'd be mad?"

It was the same face—the same sweet, teasing mask he wore at school, at karaoke—but the words crawled under Gyu-jin's skin like ice.

He tried to move past him, but Tae-min pressed a single finger to his chest, pushing him back down onto the seat. His knees buckled too easily.

"Nuh-uh. You can go. I'll even drive you to his place." His hand tilted Gyu-jin's chin up with disarming care. "I'm just going to break you a bit first… give him a surprise, yeah?"

Then the softness dropped. His fingers clamped around Gyu-jin's wrists, pinning them.

His teeth sank into Gyu-jin's neck, sharp enough to make him gasp.

"Nh-wait…stop—" His voice was barely above a whisper, the fight drained from his limbs.

Tae-min pulled back, breath warm against his skin. "…It's too bad," he murmured. "*I actually wasn't lying when I said you were a cute guy."*

★ ☆

The car door clicked open before Gyu-jin even realized they'd stopped moving. He blinked awake hard, catching himself just before his head hit the window.

His body felt like wet sand — too shapeless to hold himself together.

They were parked in front of a familiar street, the number etched in his memory despite himself. *Seong-Jun's place.*

Tae-min leaned across the seat. Eyes full of glee. "Give my kind regards, yeah? Ah—" He tapped his chin in mock thought, eyes flicking over Gyu-jin lazily. "Maybe I should've dropped you off shirtless. Would've been…fun."

Gyu-jin's breath caught in his throat.

Tae-min grinned wider, sharp teeth behind warmth. "Well, I mean, you can't really walk anyway… *multiple reasons."*

His wink was slow, deliberate, like a match strike.

"Semantics." He tossed the word like it was nothing.

The door shut behind him, the engine revving before he could think of a reply. Tae-min waved as he pulled away, all cheerful edges and false brightness. The taillights dissolved into the night.

Gyu-jin stared after them, the red glow bleeding into the darkness. Everything felt wrong — muted sound, heavy air — like he was looking through an old black-and-white lens, but Tae-min had been in full color. A misplaced thing in a setting that didn't want it there.

His chest rose in a shaky breath.

He knew which door was Seong-Jun's, but his legs felt detached from the idea of moving. Every blink made his vision grainier, like static crawling at the edges. The house loomed, the call button for the gate bright under the porch light. He could press it. He could try walking home. He could…

His fingers hovered, wavering. He didn't even realize he'd sat down against the wall until the rough concrete scraped through his jacket. His thoughts swam, all in pieces.

The sharp sound of the gate opening cut through the fog.

Seong-Jun stepped out, cigarette between his fingers, exhaling smoke like he owned the air around him.

He stopped mid-step when his gaze landed on the small figure slumped at the edge of his property.

“Fuck—Gyu?” That sharp, smug, but familiar grin crept up onto his face.

“Don’t show up all fucking week…show up at my house” he took a few slow strides towards the boy, shrinking the distance between them.

“Miss me that much?”

Gyu-jin’s head lifted slowly, carefully, like he’d break if he moved too fast “…Seong-Jun…” His voice was breathy, low, cracking as if he’d been crying. “…was she your girlfriend…?”

His grin faltered, just for a second..*jealousy? Cute*. His grin came back just as quick as it slipped.

“Which girl are we talking about….You’re gonna have to be more specific here Gyu-jin”

He spoke as if he was playing a game with Gyu-jin’s jealousy. A cruel, deliberate jab.

But Gyu-jin just stumbled up with effort. His knees almost gave out but Seong-Jun’s hand shot out, catching him.

“The hell—” Seong-Jun’s usual sharp bite returned. “Is this idiot fucking drunk?”

He scoffed, steadying him upright.

“Can’t even smell the alcohol on you. You’re a fucking lightweight.”

Gyu-jin half-stepped forward again, tugged at his shirt, like a sulking child. “…the girl… outside school…”

That made Seong-Jun blink.

“I guess I wasn’t wrong about the sulking thing.”

Then realization hit, a laugh, sharp and abrupt. “Wait—wait—”

He stared. “My cousin?!” His laugh got louder, like the idea itself was ridiculous.

He gripped Gyu-jin’s shoulders, bending slightly to meet his eyes. “She’s not my girlfriend. Happy? Now get your drunk-tard ass off my property.”

But the smirk faltered.

Up close, in the glow of the porch light, Seong-Jun saw them — faint at first, then undeniable. Marks. Dark bruises, red bites, scratches scattered across Gyu-jin’s collarbone.

His gaze dropped, his smirk gone completely.

He tugged at Gyu-jin's jacket sleeve without warning. The fabric slid up to reveal his wrist — and Seong-Jun froze. The skin was ringed in deep red, so raw it looked burned into him.

Something inside him went very still. He realized why he couldn't smell any alcohol on Gyu-jin. Then it snapped.

"Fucking hell." His voice was quieter now, but it wasn't calm. It was the kind of quiet that burned.

He didn't understand the feeling flooding his chest. He'd been angry before — at teachers, at people in his way, at Gyu-jin himself — but this was something else. He didn't care if it made sense. He didn't care if he should be asking why.

He yanked Gyu-jin's arm up, holding it so they both could see the damage. His voice was low, tight.

"Who did this?"

Gyu-jin's eyes jittered, unfocused, clinging to the sight of his own wrist like he could anchor himself there. Then he blinked. Just once. But it was too heavy, too much—like even that small act toppled him from the inside. His knees buckled, his body caving in on itself, every ounce of strength draining away.

He stumbled.

And collapsed straight into Seong-Jun's arms.

His face barely reached the taller boy's shoulder, his breath thin and uneven, shaking like the air itself was too much to hold. His voice cracked out—small, weak, worn down.

"...It's… it's cold now…"

His fingers clutched at Seong-Jun's shirt, curling tight like he might fall through the floor if he let go.

For a moment, Seong-Jun stilled. His eyes never moved, never left the sight of the boy curled against him, fragile and collapsing into his chest.

Then—finally—he exhaled. His hand slid up, threading through Gyu-jin's hair. Careful, almost deceptively tender. Gentle enough that the boy didn't even flinch.

"Knew my dog would crawl back the second he got hurt."

His tone was sharp, mocking, but his eyes drank in every line of Gyu-jin's face, studying him like he was memorizing the cracks. His jaw clenched hard, muscle twitching.

"But this scenario? Really fucking annoying."

★.　　☆

The sound of running water echoed through the tiled room, soft at first, lulling—then cut off suddenly, leaving behind a heavy silence.
Humidity clung to the air, hitting Gyu-jin like a slap. Beads of dampness settled on his lashes, into his hair, dragging him into the present whether he wanted it or not.

Seong-Jun lounged against the bathroom wall, shoulders slouched like he owned the place. His head tilted lazily when he noticed Gyu-jin's foggy eyes focusing at last. With a push of his shoulder, he straightened.

"God, finally."

He pressed a cloth and a bar of soap into Gyu-jin's hands. The sharp scent clung to the air—luxurious, far too clean, a direct insult compared to Gyu-jin's disarray.

"Get in. Clean yourself up. Water'll clear your head." His voice carried that impatient drawl, already moving toward the door like this was beneath him. "Might help wear off whatever shit you got drugged with."

Gyu-jin froze. He stared at the soap in his palm, then lifted his eyes toward the bath. Steam curled above warm water, little bubbles forming a light foam across the surface. It looked… like something soft, something from a life he barely remembered—like the baths his mother used to draw when he was sick and small.

"…Seong-Jun…"

The taller boy slowed. He leaned casually against the doorframe, shoulder pressed into it, turning just enough to face him.

"What is it?" His voice was calm. Too calm. Detached, like none of this even scratched at him.

Gyu-jin's voice was soft, quiet, cracked at the edges like speaking itself was a burden. His eyes didn't meet Seong-Jun's—slid downward instead, flicking over his own disheveled shirt.

"…Help me take it off."

For a moment, silence clung thick in the room.

Seong-Jun's brows raised. His stare lingered, sharp and calculating, as though he had to make sure he hadn't misheard. The idea of Gyu-jin—*the boy who recoiled, who refused*—to ask him, even like this, pressed a twisted amusement into his chest.

A scoff left his throat, derisive, cutting. The sound of someone pretending he had a choice when he already knew he'd give in. With an easy push off the doorframe, he strode toward

him.

He stopped in front of him, gaze sinking down over Gyu-jin's trembling frame. Head tilted, watching every nervous twitch. Gyu-jin risked one shaky glance up, then exhaled shallowly, eyes darting away again, bracing like he was preparing for pain.

Of course Seong-Jun noticed. He noticed everything. His eyes rolled.

"You asked me, didn't you? So why the fuck are you still acting like I'm gonna break you?" His voice snapped with irritation, though underneath it was something heavier. "Relax, or I won't bother."

Gyu-jin bit down on his bottom lip, then gave the smallest nod. He forced his breathing to slow, chest heaving less wildly.

The moment his body settled, Seong-Jun's stance shifted too, just enough. His hands gripped the hem of Gyu-jin's shirt.

Slow. Careful. He pulled it upward, fingers dragging over heated skin as though testing how easily it could bruise. Fragile. Breakable. The fabric slid free, over his head, leaving his hair a disheveled mess.

Gyu-jin didn't meet his eyes. His lashes lowered, shielding him. His chest rose and fell too fast, skin flushed faintly pink from the heat of the room. His damp hair clung to his forehead, his cheeks warm, body caught somewhere between fragile and feverish.

Seong-Jun stared. He couldn't not.

The boy was so small. Collarbone sharp, waist narrow, arms soft and thin. Not skeletal, but lacking strength, lacking protection. And his pale skin—littered in marks. Scratches, bruises layered over bruises, fresh bites staining over the older ones.

Ruined. Disheveled. Vulnerable.
So damn cute.

He wanted to touch. To drag his fingers along ribs, trace each bone, press into every bruise until it bloomed deeper.

Because Gyu-jin looked better like this. *Broken.*

But annoyance curled hot beneath it. Those marks weren't his. They didn't belong to him.

And they should have.

Gyu-jin finally lifted his eyes, glassy from the steam, voice small, soft, like it was all he had left.

"I'm—… Thanks…"

The sight of him cracked the trance.
Seong-Jun's shoulders loosened, his jaw eased. He snapped his gaze away, gesturing sharply to the folded clothes waiting on the marble.

"Change into that. I'll be in the kitchen. Don't fucking take forever."

Before Gyu-jin could answer, he was gone, the door clicking closed behind him.

Gyu-jin lingered in silence.

Why was Seong-Jun like this? Why hadn't he just shoved him in a cab, called someone else, thrown him away like trash—especially after being ignored for a week?

None of it made sense.

Still, he stepped into the bath. The water slid over him, warmth sinking deep into bruised skin. Not too hot, not cold, not lukewarm.

Perfect. Like it was made just for him.

Foam curled soft against his body, clouds cradling the sharp sting of his thoughts.

And slowly—finally—his head began to clear.

……

About fifteen minutes slipped by. Seong-Jun was sprawled lazily in his chair, scrolling through his phone, eyes flickering up to the time every few minutes. He couldn't tell if the minutes were dragging like sludge or if Gyu-jin was just taking forever in there.

The bathroom door finally creaked open, and the sound was enough to pull Seong-Jun's gaze off the screen. Gyu-jin stepped out, cautious, like he was trespassing in someone else's house. Displaced. Out of place. But to Seong-Jun, it looked different—dangerously so.

The borrowed clothes drowned him. The hem of the shirt slipped low over one shoulder, exposing the fragile slope of his collarbone. The sweatpants sagged loose around his thin legs, pooling at his ankles and folding over his toes. His hair was damp, droplets clinging to the nape of his neck. His cheeks were flushed from the bath, lashes wet and longer from the steam, nose tinged pink like he'd just finished crying.

Pathetic. Soft. Pretty.
Why the hell does this idiot have to look like a bitch in heat?

Seong-Jun didn't realize he'd been staring too long until Gyu-jin's voice cut into the silence.

“I feel better… a lot better…” His words faltered, hovering like he was choking on the rest of them. He tried again, hesitant. “Thank you… how can I—”

The sharp scrape of a chair across the floor cut him off. Gyu-jin flinched at the sound.

“Stop talking. Just come here and sit.”

Gyu-jin’s fingers twisted around each other, restless. But he obeyed, slipping into the chair across from him, eyes down, sleeves bunched in his fists like a child bracing for scolding.

A bowl slid across the table. Another chair dragged out. Seong-Jun sat opposite him with careless grace, already bored.

Gyu-jin glanced from the soup to Seong-Jun, lips parting like he was about to speak—but Seong-Jun’s voice cut sharper than a blade.

“Eat. You need food or you’ll be too tired tomorrow.”

The steam curled up into Gyu-jin’s face. Hangover soup. He’d never actually been hung over before, but he recognized the scent from his mother’s younger days. He figured it would help, so he ate quietly, spoon trembling against the rim of the bowl.

Seong-Jun toyed with his fork, tapping, twisting, waiting. Watching.

When Gyu-jin finally set his spoon down, wiping the corner of his mouth carefully, Seong-Jun’s eyes locked on him like he’d been waiting for an eternity.

“God, you eat so fucking slow.”

“Oh… didn’t know you were waiting for me…”

The stare he got in return was condescending. Like he was too stupid to breathe. Seong-Jun sucked in a sharp inhale, leaning back as if restraining himself from spitting out something cruel.

Then he leaned forward again, elbow pressed into the table, gaze drilling into Gyu-jin.

“You remember what happened yet?”

The words hit. Gyu-jin’s expression cracked, a flicker of dread. He shifted, guilty, like recalling something he wished he hadn’t.

“Well… yeah. But it’s fine… really. I don’t want to cause unnecessary drama.”

The fork bent in Seong-Jun’s hand. He kept twisting, pressing until the metal snapped clean in two. His jaw flexed, unreadable, eyes never leaving Gyu-jin.

“Are you going to tell me who it was? Or do I have to snap your fucking fingers one by one until you do?”

Gyu-jin's breath hitched. He knew better than to think Seong-Jun's threats were empty. He sighed, voice breaking softer than before.

"The… uhm… I don't know if you'll remember… the boy from karaoke, and the hallway… his name is Tae-min…" His voice wavered, dipped to a whisper. The guilt creeping up "…the one you got mad at me for talking to."

Seong-Jun's stare burned through him. Gyu-jin couldn't stop picking at his skin. The silence pressed heavy until Seong-Jun dragged a hand through his hair, exhaling, trying to rein himself in.

Then he scoffed, low and venomous.

"Can you not just listen to me and do what I fucking tell you to?"

Slow, deliberate steps closed the space between them. Gyu-jin shrank, fingers trembling then darting to his lap, gaze refusing to look up.

Seong-Jun's hand caught his jaw, harsh and unyielding, forcing his chin up. The grip bit into his skin.

"Gyu-jin, how many times do I have to smash your skull in before you just listen? I told you not to talk to that bastard. Would this have happened if you just listened? Do I have to put you on a fucking leash so you stop wagging your tail for every loser who's nice to you?"

Gyu-jin stilled. Resistance was useless. *And he wasn't really wrong.* If Gyu-jin had ignored Tae-min, brushed him off, maybe none of this would've happened. *He hated it—hated that Seong-Jun was always right, that his arrogance came with proof, with consequence.*

His eyes went glossy.

Seong-Jun noticed immediately. He always did. His grip shifted, jaw to cheek, thumb brushing a tear before it could fall.

"…I'm sorry—really, I should've listened." His voice cracked, trembling into a whisper. He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

Seong-Jun's thumb stilled. His laugh was sharp, short, disappointed.

"You're sorry? *What the fuck are you sorry for, exactly?* You keep apologizing to me, but continue to piss me off."

He dropped down to Gyu-jin's eye level, gaze unflinching.

"I'm pissed, yeah. At him. Not really at you. So stop crying. It's pathetic."

Gyu-jin nodded, quick. He knew better than to press further.

Seong-Jun straightened, peeling his eyes away.

“It’s late. I’m tired.”

Hands shoved into his pockets, he turned toward the stairs.

Gyu-jin lingered in place, stiff, unsure. *Was he supposed to follow? Stay? Ask?*

“Hurry up before I change my mind and make you sleep outside.”

Oh. That was it.

Gyu-jin followed. No protest. No energy left to argue.

Upstairs, the hesitation hit him. Seong-Jun’s room. The memory of that day. He’d sleep on the floor. Anywhere but the bed.

Of course, Seong-Jun noticed the pause. He rolled his eyes, collapsing onto the mattress.

“I’m too pissed off to do anything to you, fucking idiot. Just sleep. I don’t have the energy to make you a bed on the floor.”

Heat crawled up Gyu-jin’s face.

“No, no, I didn’t think—”

The sharp clench of Seong-Jun’s jaw was enough to shut him up. He swallowed the rest of his words and climbed in.

The bed was big enough that they didn’t touch. Seong-Jun was out in seconds. Gyu-jin lay stiff, restless, thoughts gnawing.

I guess he was quite tired.
Did I really stress him out that much?

Guilt coiled in his stomach, heavy. Even though Seong-Jun had said it wasn’t his fault, even though he’d claimed he wasn’t mad at him, the guilt still rooted deep. *Why did he feel like he owed Seong-Jun? Why did he feel like he’d betrayed something that wasn’t even his to betray?* They weren’t dating. They weren’t friends. There was no contract, no demand for loyalty. And yet… he still felt disloyal. Still wanted to keep Seong-Jun pleased. For safety? To avoid humiliation? Or was it something else he couldn’t admit?

The thoughts dulled as his eyes grew heavy.

The night deepened from navy to black.

Two breaths, almost in sync.
Two boys, bound by chaos. From the outside, it looked like pure venom. But here, in silence, they slept peacefully. Together. Like it wasn’t the strangest thing in the world.

Birds chirped outside, trees swayed against the glass, and the sun pressed down on Gyu-jin like an intrusive hand, a warm ray that felt more like urgency than comfort.

His lashes fluttered, eyes hazily focusing on the quiet morning, but he immediately wanted to sink back under, even for just a few more minutes. He closed them again, willing himself to drift—

Then a breath ghosted hot across his cheek.

His eyes flew open.

The realization struck hard and fast, like a bullet to the chest.
Seong-Jun's arm was wrapped firm around his waist, not just draped lazily, but slipped beneath his shirt, palm against bare skin. His leg hooked between Seong-Jun's own, anchoring himself there. Worse, Gyu-jin's own hand had traitorously curled into the older boy's shirt. No pillow beneath his head, only Seong-Jun's shoulder.

Panic ripped through him. He jolted back too quickly, cursing himself internally a million times in just those few seconds—but before he could squirm far, that grip at his waist tightened, pulling him back like a leash.

"Stop being annoying," Seong-Jun muttered, voice thick with sleep.

How can he still be like this, when he wasn't even fully conscious?

Gyu-jin froze, the fight draining out of him. His heart thrashed, but his body complied. Eyes wide, refusing to close for a long while, until exhaustion finally dragged him under again.

. . . . . .

When Gyu-jin's eyes snapped open the second time, it wasn't birdsong or sunlight. It was movement.

Seong-Jun's leg pressed between his, knee shifting up—directly against his crotch.

The jolt tore a startled sound out of Gyu-jin before he could choke it down. He shot upright, too fast, the mattress groaning under the sudden shift.

That finally forced Seong-Jun awake. A groan slipped out as he dragged a hand over his face, voice still low and hoarse with morning.

“Fucking hell.” His tone rasped, the sound crawling over Gyu-jin like static.

Seong-Jun sat up slowly, fingers raking through his messy hair.

“You’re worse than an alarm clock.”

“You just!—” Gyu-jin’s throat seized on the words, strangling them before they could escape. “…Nothing. Never mind.”

Seong-Jun tilted his head, studying him with that half-lidded morning gaze, hair falling into his face. He leaned in closer, lips curling.

“I just what? What did I do?”

Gyu-jin recoiled instinctively, the flinch so obvious it stung. That stupid smirk.

Then—

Seong-Jun broke into laughter, the kind that left him breathless. He sighed dramatically when it finally ebbed, grin still carved into his face.

“You’re fucking funny sometimes,” he scoffed, sliding off the bed with effortless ease. A stretch, a dismissive glance, and then he disappeared into the bathroom.

Gyu-jin stayed where he was, perched stiffly on the mattress. His nails dragged across his lip until the skin split and the copper tang of blood bloomed on his tongue. He couldn’t explain the nervous churn inside him, that restless dread of what Seong-Jun would do next.

Five minutes later, the bathroom door opened.

Seong-Jun emerged, toweling his hair in lazy strokes, droplets of water flinging across the floor like he couldn’t care less if the whole room got soaked.

Gyu-jin stilled. His gaze betrayed him before he could stop it.

Seong-Jun looked like something carved out of arrogance itself. Water traced the lines of his chest, slid down firm abs, clung to the sharp cut of his jaw. His damp hair plastered itself against his forehead and cheekbones, and that faint flush from the heat only made him look more untouchable.

When Seong-Jun’s eyes met his, Gyu-jin jerked his eyes away, cheeks burning hot.

And Seong-Jun didn’t even comment, like the glance was accidental and just turned himself towards the uniform hanging from the handle of his wardrobe.

Maybe he thought he actually didn’t notice—

Until Seong-Jun's voice cut the air.

"Don't stare at me like that. I'm already holding back enough as it is."

The words sank into him like teeth. Gyu-jin's throat locked, blood rushing to his face. He didn't dare look again. His only thought pulsed in his skull like a mantra—

Change the topic.
Change the topic.
Change the fucking topic.

"I should—probably go home…" he blurted, words tumbling too fast, too desperate. "My mom's probably worried about me."

Seong-Jun buckled his belt, glanced at him blankly.

"No."

The answer landed like a slap. Gyu-jin stared, genuinely wasn't expecting that answer.

"Seriously—my mom gets worried, she'll—"

"I texted her. From your phone. Said you were on a school trip you forgot to mention." His tone was flat, casual, infuriatingly calm. "You should get a password. Pretty stupid not to."

A hollow puff of air slipped from Gyu-jin's chest—half disbelief, half bitter defeat.

"Why do I have to stay here? I can go to school, I'm not—"

"Gyu-jin." Seong-Jun's tone sliced through his protest, final and cold. "I said no."

He started for the door, but stopped at the frame, back still turned.

"You didn't go to the police. Instead, you showed up at my door looking like you'd been chewed up and spit out. I'm the last person you were with, and there's no fucking report. How's it going to look if you walk out now? Just stay put until it fades."

He left without giving space for argument, the slam of finality in every step.

Gyu-jin bit down hard on the inside of his cheek.
And, as always, Seong-Jun was right.
It was so fucking annoying.

For a few minutes, he just sat in silence, legs crossed on the bed, hands lazily toying with the fabric of the borrowed sweatpants, trying to comprehend the situation he was even in.

Just then, the silence broke.

"Gyu-jin!" Seong-Jun's voice rang from downstairs.

He scrambled up, nearly tripping on the oversized sweatpants as he made his way down.

His feet barely lifting from the cold floor, carrying him into the kitchen where Seong-Jun stood behind the counter, looking like he'd already run out of patience for the day.

A bowl clattered onto the island in front of him.

Gyu-jin stared.

Cereal. Seriously.

Seong-Jun's voice came sharp after.

"Don't break anything. Don't touch shit in my room. Don't break any windows either—doors are locked."

Gyu-jin's breath caught at that last part.

Seong-Jun dangled a set of keys in the air, smirking before shoving them into his pocket. The metal clinked like a taunt.

"Don't really trust you not to try and sneak out. You've already broken two promises…..gonna have to *real* work hard to make that up to me."

He stepped toward the front door, opening it with casual ease, then leaned back against the frame as if something had just crossed his mind.

"Oh—and food's in the fridge. Don't care what you eat. Just don't starve to death."

The door shut with a click, then locked tight.

Silence.
Gyu-jin blinked, dumbfounded. Trapped. Caged. *By fucking Seong-Jun.*

He let out a long, exaggerated sigh, resisting the urge to kick the island in frustration. He folded his arms onto the counter, dropped his head into them, and groaned into the empty house.

Seriously. Worst luck of all time. Did God just despise him?

Halfway through the school day, Seong-Jun was already exhausted.

Barely dragging himself to class, half-assing through roll calls, searching from room to room like he was on some stupid hunt—for nothing.

Now he was perched on top of the bathroom counter where the sinks were, legs spread carelessly, smoke curling around him like a crown of ash. Min-Hyuk and Ji-hoon lingered close, hanging onto his words as if they were front-row at a drama. He wasn't telling them everything, of course—only the parts he allowed them to know. Just enough to keep them tentative.

Seong-Jun exhaled through his nose, sharp and dismissive, before he spoke.

"The bastard's practically a ghost. Asked around if anyone knew him—these idiots froze up like I was about to beat them to death. Useless fucking retards. Ended up going to the office just to check which class he's in."

His lips twisted into a smile that wasn't a smile, laugh tearing out of his throat short and sharp, like a blade dragged across glass.

"And the fucker doesn't even go to our school."

Ji-hoon and Min-Hyuk exchanged looks—faces knotting into disbelief. Ji-hoon's confusion was written all over him, but Min-Hyuk's mouth already cracked into a grin. He snorted, choking down laughter like it was too much to hold.

"Wait, wait, so—this kid just shows up, plays Mr. Good Guy, fucks with that dog of yours…" his voice pitched higher as he wheezed through his laughter, "…just to mess with you??"

Seong-Jun didn't even grace him with a reaction, only cut him a sidelong glance, expression unreadable, and took a long, lazy drag of his cigarette. The silence that followed only made Min-Hyuk snicker harder.

"Or maybe," he drawled, lips curling, "he actually had the hearts for that kid. Fuck-Gyu. I mean, he does look like a girl. If he grew his hair out, swear to god, he'd probably be the most fuckable—"

The crack of Seong-Jun's hand slamming against the counter split the air like a muffled gunshot. The sinks rattled. Smoke trembled in the air.

His glare pinned Min-Hyuk in place, jaw tight enough to splinter bone, eyes burning straight through his friend's skull.

Min-Hyuk's hands shot up in surrender immediately, with a nervous grin, laughter stumbling out thin and empty.

Ji-hoon finally cut in, voice awkward, careful.

"Okay…let's just be realistic here. You literally have this kid in your house and you haven't done jack shit. Are you even sure you actually want to—"

“I’m not stupid. The both of you have your brain placed in your fucking dicks.” Seong-Jun’s words sliced through him before he could finish.

He leaned forward slightly, cigarette glowing between his fingers, voice dropping low—like confession, like a threat.

“If I fucked him now, he’d just freak out. Wouldn’t mind him struggling under me, actually. But it’d ruin everything. I want to make him beg. Beg for me, not tell me to stop. I want to tear his head apart until he can’t tell the difference between me and himself. I’ll make him depend on me for everything. Make him think he’s worthless without me. Keep him from everyone else. Make him feel like shit just for smiling at someone else. Make him so useless he has to ask me for permission to breathe.”

He paused, inhaled slow.

“I want him mine. Completely.”

The bathroom thickened with silence, smoke curling heavy in the fluorescent light. Both Min-Hyuk and Ji-hoon stared, dumbfounded, as if they weren’t sure if he was joking anymore.

Then Min-Hyuk scoffed, shaking his head with a laugh that tried to mask unease.

“Don’t know why you torture the kid constantly if you had the hearts for him this bad.”

Seong-Jun just shrugged, tipped his head back against the mirror, dragging deep on his cigarette before exhaling toward the ceiling. He didn’t bother to look at them.

“I don’t. It’s more of a…territorial thing.”

Min-Hyuk broke out into laughter that echoed against the tiles, smirking as he leaned back against the wall. He took a drag of his own, smoke spilling lazily from his grin.

“Yeah, bro. Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

Chapter End Notes

ok bro lmk if shits good or what you think but this chapter was maddddd long but i had fun writing it, i have zero money so i will not indulge in substances for a while so the next chapter might come out faster. lmk what you think tho fr i fw anything anyone who reads this has to say, my twitter is my user here @/yaoieugenics

Chapter 3: Holding On

Chapter Summary

> Seongjun and Gyujin trapped in each others proximity, almost every second long enough to form questions, not just from the outside, within themselves, questions neither of them had answers to

Chapter Notes

> hello everyone i hope you like this chapter it took me a while to write because i couldnt really focus hard enough and i didnt want to rush and make them go off character, also last chapter pretend the shit at the ramen shop happened on a thursday instead lmao i forgot the days

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The white lights on the ceiling stabbed straight into Gyu-Jin's eyes, searing and merciless. It felt like they were mocking him, glaring back even harder than he glared at them. If his own eyes could've spat fire, the bulbs would've burst by now.

His head rested against the back of the couch, tilted up at a sharp angle that ached his neck, but he didn't move. His knees were pulled tight against his chest, bare feet sinking into the cushions beneath him—like he was trying to take up less space in a house that didn't even belong to him.

He exhaled sharply, throwing his head forward with a dull thud of frustration.

His day had been hellishly boring—so boring he thought his skull would crack from the pressure of it. Every minute dragged like an hour, every glance at the clock stretched time even thinner. He kept checking it, again and again, like the stupid thing was purposely slowing down just to taunt him. The only "event" of the entire day was the shower he took earlier, and even that had been more routine than relief.

The first wave of boredom had hit when he realized he didn't have his phone. He'd searched everywhere he dared without overstepping boundaries, but the effort was useless.

And then it got worse—crushing, almost—when he realized how stuck he was. He didn't even know what he was allowed to touch in Seong-Jun's house and what he wasn't. Before leaving, Seong-Jun had rattled off a half-serious, half-threatening "briefing" about rules, and now everything in the house felt off-limits. Every cupboard handle, every drawer pull, every

stack of books… touching anything at all felt invasive. Like trespassing. Like he was an unwanted guest, sitting where he shouldn't be.

His eyes flicked up to the clock again, probably for the hundredth time today.

4:30 p.m.

School had ended half an hour ago. Still no sign of Seong-Jun.

The thought made his stomach twist, a strange mix of relief and… something else. He never imagined he'd be waiting for Seong-Jun—actually waiting, watching the door like some abandoned puppy. Worse, he never imagined he'd be hoping—*desperately hoping*—that the boy would just appear already, swaggering through the door and filling the silence with his suffocating presence.

He thought Seong-jun would've stormed home earlier, maybe after breaking Taemin's nose or worse, just to make sure Gyu-jin wasn't halfway out a window. But the silence stretched on, and with it came the ache of hunger. The only thing in his stomach was the cereal Seong-jun had shoved at him that morning. His appetite had been gone all day anyway, eaten away by nerves.

He bit the inside of his cheek, chewing at the sting until his jaw ached.

I wonder if he'll be hungry too.
I still haven't really repaid him for anything…

He's helping me out, and I've done nothing back.
I'm so fucking bored. At least this would distract me.

The thoughts tumbled over each other until his chest felt tight, like he needed to do something or suffocate. Finally, he shoved himself up from the couch, stretching out stiff limbs.

He could cook. He should cook.

At least then, when Seong-Jun walked in—*whether he was pissed off, blood stained knuckles, or just in a bad mood*—there'd be something waiting to soften the blow. A distraction. A way to repay him, even just a little.

But even as he thought it, Gyu-Jin knew better.

The first time he'd tried something like this—*tried to be kind to Seong-Jun*—it hadn't gone well. At all. He wasn't even expecting gratitude. The worst Seong-Jun could do was refuse to eat it, maybe sneer, maybe toss it aside. Compared to everything else he'd done, that wasn't much at all.

So Gyu-Jin justified it, over and over, talking himself into it until the nerves dulled. This wasn't about weakness. This wasn't about desperation.

It was just something to do. Just something to keep him from losing his mind in the silence.

He ran a hand lazily through his hair, and headed for the kitchen.

★ ☆

Gyu-Jin gave the dish one last taste, making sure he hadn't completely fucked it up.

Bibimbap. Easy enough. Something familiar, something he could actually trust himself to make. Surprisingly, Seong-Jun had everything he needed—almost too much, like the fridge was stocked for appearances, not for use. Half the ingredients looked untouched, as if no one in this house had cared enough to cook in years.

It tasted good. Smelled even better.

He slid onto a stool at the kitchen counter, legs swinging idly, fingers knotting into the long sleeve that hung over his hands—the sleeve that wasn't even his. He twisted it tight, over and over, until it cut into his skin.

The feeling was stupidly childish, like he was waiting for a parent to come home and pat him on the head. But it had been hours now. He seriously thought he was going to die from the boredom, from the quiet. How the hell was Seong-Jun not home yet?

He sighed, eyes glued to the sleeve he kept worrying between his fingers. Today was torture. Not the usual kind of torture Seong-Jun inflicted, but something almost worse. The type where time dragged itself across glass, every second prickling against his skin. He never wanted to do this again.

The door opened.

Footsteps. The slam of it shutting.

"Fuck-Gyu. You run away yet?"

Gyu-Jin's head snapped up so fast his neck cracked. The voice wasn't loud enough to echo, but it filled the silence like a whip. He almost leapt straight off the stool, like he'd been caught doing something wrong.

Seong-Jun spotted him, didn't react beyond that. With a casualness that felt deliberate, he slung his bag onto the rack.

"Surprising. You're still here."

Gyu-Jin's bare feet shifted nervously against the cold tiles, toes curling down like they could dig for safety. *He knew Seong-Jun already knew he hadn't run—otherwise he would've shown up hours ago.*

Still, his throat tightened.

“Seong-Jun… you’re back…” He kept his gaze low, pinned anywhere but the taller boy’s eyes. *“You were gone longer than I expected.”* The last words fell quieter, softer, like he was scared they’d reveal too much. Like they’d reveal the truth—*that he’d been waiting, really waiting, the whole damn time.*

Seong-Jun arched a brow, scoffing as he strode closer.

“What? Did you fucking miss me?”

The air pressed in. Gyu-Jin stiffened, chest tightening, bracing himself. When Seong-Jun closed the distance, his instincts screamed he was about to be touched, grabbed, shoved—something. His body flinched before it happened.

“N—well…”

He stumbled backward, almost tripping over his own feet before darting around to the kitchen island. His words tumbled out too fast, a desperate pivot.

“I—I made you dinner. Couldn’t think of any other way to repay you, really… My mom owns a restaurant so… I’m pretty good at cooking…”

Seong-Jun tilted his head, eyes narrowing like he was dissecting him under glass. His silence stretched, sharp enough to make Gyu-Jin squirm.

Then finally—

A sharp exhale. A low hum. He strolled toward the island, casual but heavy, until he leaned forward onto the marble, hands flat against the cold surface. His gaze pinned Gyu-Jin in place.

“You know…” His voice dropped, low and smooth, “you could repay me by standing still and letting me beat you till your legs give out and you’re a crying mess on the floor.”

Gyu-Jin’s breath caught. Seong-Jun wasn’t smiling. He didn’t look like he was teasing. He looked like he could really do it—smash his head into the marble right here and not blink once.

Seong-Jun’s lips curled, just slightly, as a chuckle slipped out—soft, almost cruel in how amused it was by Gyu-Jin’s fear.

“I’m joking...” He slid onto the stool lazily. *“You know I wouldn’t need you to let me do that. I’d just do it if I wanted to.”*

Gyu-Jin let out a shaky, uneven breath.

Yeah. He knew. He fucking knew.

“Well, I’m fucking hungry anyway, so just give me whatever you made, I guess.”

Gyu-Jin blinked fast, nodding as if on command. He rushed to dish up a bowl, hands quick but nervous, then slid it across the counter. Seong-Jun barely glanced at it before recognizing the dish.

“Bibimbap, huh.”

No thanks. No acknowledgment. Just a glance back at him before he took a bite, utensils clinking against the bowl. Gyu-Jin watched without meaning to, eyes tracing every reaction, every flicker across Seong-Jun’s face. He tried not to stare, but his chest buzzed, waiting for something—anything.

The taller boy’s eyes lit briefly. His expression shifted, sharp edges softening just slightly. He almost looked… impressed.

“Could keep you here as a personal chef.” He smirked, words dripping lazy arrogance as he went back for another bite. “You’re cooking for me while you’re here. Maybe that’ll be enough to repay me.”

Heat rushed up Gyu-Jin’s neck, flooding his cheeks. It wasn’t embarrassment, not exactly—it was relief. *Gratitude.* A strange, stupid warmth that shouldn’t exist but did anyway. His eyes dropped, but a small smile crept up before he could stop it.

Seong-Jun noticed. His gaze sharpened, stilled.

He’d never seen Gyu-Jin smile like that—not really. Once, at the ramen shop, but this was different. This was softer. Real. Seong-Jun always thought Gyu-Jin was cute when he was hurt, angry, squirming. He wanted to keep him like that forever. But that—that smile—wasn’t bad either. He could keep that too. Having both wouldn’t hurt.

“Get yourself a bowl too. You’re the one who made it, dumbass. Fucking weird if you don’t eat.”

Gyu-Jin’s eyes snapped up, startled.

Well… it’s still Seong-Jun. That’s probably the nicest I’ll get.

He dished himself a bowl, sliding into a stool a few seats away.

They ate in silence. But it wasn’t sharp, wasn’t heavy. It was the same silence from the ramen shop, the same silence that hung between them on the walk back to Seong-Jun’s house.

Not tense. Not warm. Just… comfortable.

Unassuming.

When Seong-Jun finished eating, his eyes drifted to Gyu-Jin, who was still chewing carefully, like each bite needed extra thought. He didn’t rush, didn’t fidget as much—almost calm. For once, he didn’t look like he was about to crack under the weight of just existing around him. He just ate slowly, shyly, like he was scared to take up too much space.

“Gyujin.”

The younger boy’s head snapped up immediately, abandoning his food. He wiped at the corner of his mouth clumsily, sleeve dragging against his skin.

“…Were you waiting for me again…?”

Seong-Jun’s stare was blank for a beat, unreadable, before he scoffed. Dismissive. Like Gyu-Jin had just asked if the sky was blue. He leaned back in the stool, voice dripping casual venom.

“That bastard. Taemin, or whatever.”

Gyu-Jin’s expression faltered instantly, he looked like he couldn’t stomach what was about to follow. Seong-Jun noticed—the flicker of guilt in his face—and his jaw clenched.

“Tell me—did he fuck you?”

The air in the room snapped cold. Gyu-Jin’s fingers immediately found each other, nails digging at skin as he picked nervously, silent. His throat worked uselessly; the words caught there, refusing to come out.

Seong-Jun’s eyes stayed fixed on Gyu-Jin, a glare sharp enough to blister. *Watching him freeze up every damn time he got nervous was really starting to fucking piss him off.*

His tongue pressed hard against the inside of his cheek as he leaned over the counter. Then, with a clipped flick of his wrist, the fork cracked down against the marble—not shattering, but sharp enough to sound like a threat, a clean slice through the silence that made the air tighten.

The sound was gunshot-loud in the silence. Gyu-Jin flinched, head jerking up.

“Answer when I ask you something.”

His voice was low, steady, the kind of calm that made it worse.

Gyu-Jin’s hands stilled. He balled them into his sleeves, knuckles hidden, and forced himself to meet Seong-Jun’s eyes—barely, not for long.

“He didn’t… I can’t remember everything clearly but—I know he didn’t. I-it was just the… biting and—” His voice faltered, dropping off, and his gaze fell fast back to the safety of his sleeves. “He just wanted to make you mad, I think… He said he didn’t feel like hurting me that much…”

Seong-Jun stared. One long, drawn-out beat where his brain seemed to pause on the words. Then he scoffed, sharp, almost disbelieving.

“What a fucking pussy.” He leaned back, eyes drifting up to the ceiling like it wasn’t worth the energy. “Makes me almost not give a fuck anymore.”

But then he groaned under his breath, running a hand through his hair. And his tone dropped darker, colder.

“But that bastard shouldn’t touch my shit.”

The words landed heavy.

Gyu-Jin’s stomach twisted, a bitter turn. He didn’t care about the dismissive tone, didn’t even expect anything else, but—*“my shit.”* Hearing it scraped him raw.

He’s still treating me like I’m some kind of pet. Something he owns.

His chest ached. All this was getting tiring now.

“…Why does it even matter if he…did that or not? He just wanted to piss you off. I really doubt—”

The crash cut him off.

Seong-Jun had basically tossed his empty bowl across the counter, hard enough that it nearly flew off the edge. Gyu-Jin’s reflexes caught it just in time, but the porcelain crashed against his fingers, sending pain jolting up his hand. He winced, recoiling, rubbing his fingers automatically.

“Gyujin. Don’t be fucking stupid.”

The scrape of the stool was sharp as Seong-Jun stood, hands sliding into his pockets with a careless ease that made the tension worse. He didn’t even look at him as he walked toward the couch.

“Wash the dishes and watch your tone. Don’t forget who you’re talking to.”

The words weren’t loud, but they landed like a punch anyway.

Gyu-Jin froze in place, staring down at his stinging fingers. He wanted to argue, wanted to yell that he wasn’t Seong-Jun’s maid. But his chest caved instead, and he exhaled slowly, pushing his fringe out of his eyes. He told himself it was logical—he cooked, so he should clean.

It was easier that way.

★ ☆

He dried the last bowl and tucked it back into the cabinet. When he turned, his gaze caught on the living room.
Seong-Jun was sprawled on the couch, legs careless, head leaning against the armrest, phone glowing in his hand. For a second—just a second—he looked normal. Domestic, even. Like this was just another evening in some ordinary house.

Gyu-Jin blinked hard, snapping out of it. The thought felt foreign, dangerous. His chest tightened with a question he didn't want to ask but couldn't shake.

Did he find Taemin?

He didn't want the answer, not really. But the curiosity gnawed at him until it hurt.

I'll just ask. I'm the one who caused this anyway.

He walked carefully into the living room, footsteps light, cautious, like every movement risked setting off a landmine. He stopped by the couch, hovering, then reached out and tapped lightly at the armrest.

Seong-Jun didn't notice him at first. When he finally looked up from his phone, Gyu-Jin's posture was stiff, awkward. He looked like a kid begging his parent to get off a long phone call.

Seongjun just laughed, only once—quick and amused, like a slap in the silence.

"Fucking hell, you should see yourself right now, you gonna ask me for a Happy Meal?"

Gyujins jaw clenched—then his lips parted and a soft scoff escaped before he could hold it back, almost too quiet to hear.

"I'm not a kid…" He muttered, words dropping low, defensive. "Why would I—"

"What do you want."
Seong-Jun cut in, voice flat, humor gone.

The sudden change in tone caught Gyu-jin off guard, just slightly. One hand tugged at his sleeve like it could bleed out his nerves.

"You asked about Taemin earlier…" he shifted his feet against the ground, awkward, restless. "...what happened with him? I mean—did you find him…?"

His voice cracked with nerves, and Seongjun's expression sharpened with irritation. Not at him, not really, but Gyu-jin still felt the brunt of it.

"That bastard…" Seongjun sighed, leaning forward, elbows braced against his knees. His eyes stayed locked on the jittery boy in front of him. "You know he doesn't even fucking go to our school?"

Gyu-jin's lips parted like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out—just wide-eyed confusion.

"What..? He was there—at our school…he even had our uniform, that makes no sense—"

"Right." Seongjun's foot tapped against the floor, irritation vibrating through his voice. "A lot of fucking effort, pretending to go to an entire school just to mess with me."

He leaned back against the couch like even thinking about it drained him.

“Too much effort. Seriously weird. I wouldn’t do that shit if the guy owed me millions.”

Gyu-jin almost scoffed, despite the situation. *Obviously you wouldn’t. Look at your damn house.*

“I either beat the shit out of this kid in middle school and he never let it go, or…” Seongjun’s voice stilled. His jaw flexed with the thought, one he clearly hated entertaining. “...or he’s just really obsessed with you.”

Seongjun didn’t want to believe that. Couldn’t. But the thought sank sharp into him anyway.

And there was Gyu-jin. In his house. Wearing his clothes. Cooking in his kitchen.

His.
Not that bastard’s.

Gyu-jin belonged to him. He didn’t care how or why—he just did. No one else got to look at him, to touch him, to see the little mess he was like this. No one but Seongjun.

But the truth was—he didn’t even know what he saw in Gyu-jin himself. Not exactly.

The silence stretched too long, Seongjun’s mind tangled in it. Gyu-jin noticed, of course. The shift in his demeanor, the sudden quiet. And his mind spun with a completely different conclusion:

This guy is the one obsessed. Acting like I’m his possession…just because someone touched his “shit”…? Seriously?

He was the first to break it.

Gyu-jin tangled a finger through a few strands of his hair, fumbling for something to ease the thick pause. “I doubt it’s the second option… I only ever met him twice, and… we didn’t even talk much… so you don’t have to worry about that much…”

Seongjun’s focus snapped back, the tension in his shoulders easing. But that word—

“Worry?”

He rolled his eyes, leaning back into the couch. His phone slid easily back into his hand, thumb flicking it awake.

“Remote’s still in the exact same place. Nothing’s been opened. Looks like you didn’t do shit today.”

His gaze drifted toward the open window—the one he’d left open on purpose.

“And you didn’t even try a single bit to run.”

Gyu-jin's head tilted toward the window, heart sinking.

He left that open… the whole time?!

He pinched his eyes shut, internally facepalming.

He probably thinks I want to stay here now… seriously… ahh, damn it…

Seongjun couldn't pin down his reaction—was he embarrassed seongjun knew he stayed willingly? Guilty? Or just too much of a wreck to string words together like a normal human being? *This kids worse with words than a fucking chick.*

"FuckGyu. I'm saying I would've been pissed if you did run anyway." He tossed the phone down beside him with a sigh. "I'm not giving you a 'good job,' so just sit."

He gestured at the spot beside him on the couch.

Gyu-jin hesitated, chewing on the words. It wasn't really a 'good job,' but the meaning behind it—Seongjun admitting he didn't want him to run—it almost made him feel like staying had been the right choice. Even if he hadn't even noticed the damn window. And even if he had, would he really have gone?

He sank onto the couch, crossing his legs, fingers tapping against his pants as if the fabric could ground him.

Neither of them looked at each other for a while. Seongjun scrolled aimlessly through Netflix until he stopped, finally, thumb hovering. His head tilted just slightly toward Gyu-jin, who hadn't even noticed.

"What's your least favorite genre?"

The voice cut into his daze. Gyu-jin blinked, snapping to attention, startled.

"Wha—uhhh… I guess horror. Or, like, aliens."

Seongjun only shrugged, turning back to the screen. This time Gyu-jin actually watched what he was doing.

And then Seongjun clicked horror.

"Seriously..?"

Gyu-jin's lips parted, ready to scoff, head turning toward him—and Seongjun was already staring, watching him.

Then he laughed.
"I'm not watching anything with you if you're going to enjoy it too."

Gyu-jin narrowed his eyes, shifting his gaze back to the screen, muttering under his breath.
"Whatever…"

It grew darker outside, the only light the tall lamp by the couch. The movie wasn't unbearable—he liked action, guns, twists—but when gore flashed on screen, when it really looked like death, he couldn't stomach it. His eyes would flick away, and every damn time Seongjun would notice.

"Watch it."
"Focus."

Commands, tossed casually, like he'd watched the movie a thousand times already. And the worst part—he wasn't even focusing himself. He kept pulling out his phone every few minutes while still forcing Gyu-jin to keep his eyes on the screen. Some fucking 'good job'. It felt more like punishment for nothing at all.

Every jump scare, Seongjun would glance out of the corner of his eye, waiting to see him break. But Gyu-jin only flinched, barely a twitch. Boring.

Until the next jump scare. This time Seongjun reached over and flicked the lamp off.

The room plunged into darkness.

Gyu-jin didn't scream— not exactly. But a sharp yelp tore out of him, and before he could even think, he jolted forward and clung to Seongjun.

Seongjun blinked. Not what he expected. Not at all.

"Shit."

He flicked the lamp back on, eyes narrowing. He'd seen Gyu-jin scared before—mostly because of him. But never like this. Never curling into him like he was safety itself, clutching like he'd be torn apart if he let go.

Fingers threaded through his hair before Seongjun even thought about it.

Gyu-jin's eyes snapped open, realization crashing down. He jerked back, scrambling across the couch.

"Fu—" he coughed, awkward, trying to bury the heat creeping up his neck. "...sorry."

Seongjun wasn't annoyed. Not even close.

"Do it again."

Gyu-jin froze, breath catching. He shifted back, sleeve pulling over his face to hide the blush.

"Wha—n-no… I didn't mean to—"

"Do it again."

His voice left no room.

Gyu-jin's ears burned. He tilted his head, sleeve muffling his voice. "…I really didn't mean to…"

And then Seongjun moved—fast. His hand caught Gyu-jin's waist and dragged him into his lap in one motion.

A startled yelp broke from Gyu-jin's lips.

"W-what the—w-are you—"

He tried to pull away, squirming once, twice, but Seongjun only tugged him back, twisting him until he straddled his lap, facing him. His fist tangled in Gyu-jin's hair, pulling his head up just enough to force eye contact.

Gyu-jin gasped, breath hitching hard in his throat.

"You're blushing so much even your ears are red." Seongjun's voice was casual, dissecting, like he was pointing out dirt on his cheek.

Gyu-jin turned his face away, muttering.
"I'm not… it's just…"

Seongjun's hand snapped to his jaw, forcing his head back. His breathing quickened under the weight of it, trapped.

And Seongjun's eyes lit up at the sight—this pathetic little mess, flustered and cornered, unable to even hide it. A slow smirk curled at his mouth as he leaned in, hot breath skimming Gyu-jin's cheek.

"Wanna do it?"

Gyu-jin swore his heart flatlined. His face was burning, flushed scarlet. The breath he let out shook almost as much as his voice.

"..w-w…what…?"

Seongjun let go, chuckling low. His hand ruffled roughly through Gyu-jin's hair, teasing like he was nothing more than a pet.

"You get embarrassed so damn easily."

Gyu-jin's gaze dropped, lips muttering against his hem. "…that wasn't funny…"

He shoved himself off Seongjun's lap, retreating back to his spot, fixing his hair like it could erase the humiliation. Legs crossed, jaw tight.

"Wasn't joking."

Before Gyu-jin could even react, Seongjun stood, stretching like nothing had happened, thumb flicking the TV off.

“Movie was so shit it actually made me tired.”

He started toward the stairs but stopped at the first step, glancing back like he knew Gyu-jin wouldn’t move otherwise.

“When I go to bed, just follow. Don’t make me tell you every time.”

His tone was flat, commanding. A rule being laid down.

And of course, Gyu-jin scrambled up with a muttered, “okay,” trailing after him.

The morning light finally broke through the blinds, washing pale stripes across the room. Gyu-Jin rubbed at his heavy eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, a soft yawn slipping out before he could stop it.

The first thing he noticed—he’d actually slept. Slept through the night without flinching awake, without an arm hooked around his waist like he was some kind of stuffed toy, without Seong-Jun’s weight crowding his every breath.

Relief loosened his chest for all of three seconds. His eyes blinked open slow, lashes sticking, but then the realization hit him like a drop down his spine— Not only was there no arm around him, there was no Seong-Jun. At all.

He sat up, sleepy, scanning the room. Nothing.

“He’s really not here…”
“Did I seriously oversleep…?”
“Why didn’t he just wake me up??”

His body sank back into the pillow, a sigh spilling out. He didn’t even know what time it was—didn’t even have a phone to check. He hadn’t dared ask where it was yet. If Seong-Jun really had left already, then the day stretched ahead of him like a locked cage with nothing but boredom to claw at the walls. He twisted restlessly against the blankets, cursing himself in silence.

The bathroom door creaked open.

“You wanted a good morning kiss or some shit? Why are you sulking?”

Gyu-Jin turned so fast it hurt his neck, blinking hard. For a second, he almost thought his tired brain was tricking him.

But no—there he was. Seong-Jun, real as anything, tugging a shirt down over damp hair, water still dripping against his temple.

“…no… I just… I thought you left already…” His voice was soft, clumsy with sleep. His messy bed hair curtained his face until he pushed the fringe away with slow fingers, revealing heavy-lidded eyes that still hadn’t caught up to reality.

Seong-Jun raised a brow and scoffed.
“That’s why you were sulking? Do you not want me to leave?”

The words stabbed sharper than they should.

Gyu-Jin’s throat caught. “That’s not—it’s…” He scrambled, heat rushing to his face, desperate to throw the spotlight off himself. “My phone… I wanted to ask where it is…”

Seong-Jun shoved a lighter into his pocket, expression flat as he shrugged.

“Smashed it.”

The breath hitched in Gyu-Jin’s lungs, his eyes widening before he could stop the reaction. Seong-Jun didn’t even give him the space to argue—already turning away like it wasn’t worth two seconds of his attention.

“Wait! Seong-Jun… you’re joking… right? Why would you—”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Seong-Jun cut back, leaning lazy against the doorway, irritation simmering beneath his blank face. His tone was calm, but the calm that made your stomach knot tighter. “There’s nobody you need to talk to. You don’t need a phone.”

Gyu-Jin stared at him, disbelief crawling under his skin. *Is he actually insane?*

“Seriously… Youngdong is probably really worried, he has no idea what happened, my mom could text and—”

“Right. Nobody.”

This time Seong-Jun didn’t just hang back. He pushed off the frame and crossed the room, the weight of his steps dragging gravity down on Gyu-Jin. Instinct made him try to shrink away, pressing himself against the bedframe, but it was useless.

Fingers fisted in his collar.

“Gyu-Jin. Whose house are you in right now? You in that fat fuck’s house? No. You’re fucking not. You’re in mine. If they gave a single shit about you, you’d be with them. Not here. If you actually needed anyone else, they’d be with you right now.”

The words hit harder than the grip on his shirt.

Then Seong-Jun let go—rough, shoving him back into the mattress like tossing aside something too light to matter. Without another glance, he turned and walked out.

The door slammed shut behind him.

For a few seconds, all Gyu-Jin could do was stare at the wood. Then his body sagged back against the bed, his hand dragging shakily through his hair.

"Fuck."

The word came out small, barely above breath, weighted in frustration that felt more like defeat.

"He's acting like he's the only one I need—It's not like I need him either, I just…"

...feel better when I know he's not tired of me.

The thought stung worse than the shove. His whole body cringed at admitting it, even silently.

"No… okay no. It's not that… it's… but… do I need Seong-Jun? No, it's…"

"Hurry the fuck up, take a shower and make breakfast holy shit"

Seong-Jun's voice snapped from downstairs, sharp enough to rip him back into place.

"A—I'll be down now!"

★ ☆

The silence they ate in wasn't really silence at all. It was heavy—thick with words neither of them wanted to say. Not like dinner the previous night, where the quiet almost passed as tolerable. Today it was jagged, scraping, an ache that sat between them like a third presence.

After what Seong-Jun had said earlier, neither of them seemed capable of speaking. Or maybe it was just that they didn't want to. Gyu-Jin kept his head down, focusing on cooking, on chewing, on swallowing, while Seong-Jun tossed out some snark in passing before letting the weight of his disinterest settle back over the table.

When Seong-Jun finished, he dropped his utensils without care. The clatter was sharp in the muted air, making Gyu-Jin's shoulders twitch as if struck. His eyes flicked up on instinct, bracing himself. He'd come to expect that moment—the end of Seong-Jun's meal signaling the beginning of the glare that reminded him he wasn't eating fast enough, too quiet.

But this time, there wasn't a glare.

Seong-Jun wasn't looking at him at all. He looked like he was about to stand, his chair legs shifting faintly against the floor, gaze sliding toward the clock. Gyu-Jin might have let it pass—except there was something. A mark. A smudge.

"Uh, Seong-Jun… you have…"

The boy didn't answer. Didn't even flick an eye toward him, like the words hadn't touched him at all. Gyu-Jin bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. His fingers twitched against the table before he finally moved, leaning forward—hesitant, careful—as though approaching a beast that might bite.

His hand shook as he stretched across the narrow space and, after a split second of doubt, his fingertip brushed the corner of Seong-Jun's lips.

The contact burned.

He lingered one heartbeat too long before pulling back fast, retreating into the safety of his seat, shoulders curling in.

"…you had something. Right there…"

For the first time, Seong-Jun stilled. Not the kind of stillness he wore when calculating, or when deciding how to twist the knife—but something brittle, jagged. His expression faltered. He looked—startled. Like the touch had tripped some wire he hadn't realized existed.

The heat of Gyu-Jin's trembling finger still clung to his mouth. He lifted his own hand to the spot as if to confirm it had happened at all, thumb dragging faintly across his skin. Slowly, his eyes cut back to the boy.

He didn't like this. The way Gyu-Jin had slipped past his guard without even trying. It wasn't irritation, wasn't hate. It was worse—something he couldn't put a name to. Something that dug under his skin. His jaw tightened.

"Right."

The word was clipped, bitten off. He pushed back from the table, standing.

He was halfway to leaving when his gaze caught on Gyu-Jin again. The kid looked too nervous, too strung-tight, like he'd done something wrong—like he was already scrambling to apologize. Seong-Jun cut him off before he could get the words out.

"I'm hanging out with friends. It's Saturday, and I don't plan on babysitting you all day. I'll be home late again, so…" His eyes flicked around, landing on the TV like he couldn't be bothered to care. "Just watch something if you get bored. Don't do anything stupid."

Gyu-Jin swallowed hard. The words caught in his throat before he forced them out, low. "I won't…" His gaze dropped to the table. "…I'll see you later then."

Seong-Jun's eyes dragged over him one last time, up and down, slow enough to sting. He scoffed, sharp and dismissive, before turning on his heel. The door shut behind him, lock clicking in place.

The sound left Gyu-Jin slumped in his chair, staring at nothing. A long breath escaped him, shaky, frayed.

This shit really fucking sucks.

★ ☆

The day started at the PC café.

Seongjun and his friends—more like lackeys, loyal dogs who trailed him without thought—played against each other, voices ricocheting off the plastic booths. Curses when one lost, cheers when one won, their laughter scraping thin like broken glass. Mindless rats.

Seongjun's hands moved over the keyboard, but his mind wasn't in the game. Not in their jokes, their pointless comments about people walking past, not even in the quick exchange of lighters and cigarettes. They shoved past strangers with deliberate shoulders, but even that didn't cut through the static.

Because he couldn't shake him.

Park Gyu-jin. The thought was a gnawing splinter, a burn under his skin he couldn't scratch out. He hadn't even beaten that bastard who laid hands on him half to death yet. That alone twisted his chest with restless heat.

He laughed when they laughed. Nodded when they spoke. Tossed out the occasional flat, "mhm," "yeah, right." But it was hollow. Transparent. Everyone knew his mind was somewhere else.

"Okay, Seongjun, dude—you've been out of it the whole damn day. The fuck happened?"

"Yeah, you almost paid for everyone's food without a word… thought you were a different person for a sec."

Seongjun let out a heavy sigh, fingers sliding into his pocket. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, smoke curling lazy in the dim light.

"Need to beat someone's face in before I lose my shit."

A few of his lackeys laughed because that's what they were supposed to do. But Minhyuk and Jihoon exchanged a look—they knew exactly who he meant.

"That fucker. Tae, uhh… Tae something…" Minhyuk leaned forward with forced casualness, his voice barely masking nervous concern. "Wouldn't it be better if we all just fucking looked for him? I mean, the city isn't like the size of a containment."

Jihoon immediately slapped the back of his head.

"Yah. It's continent. Continent. Hah, containment? Are you a dolphin?"

"Yah!" Minhyuk snapped, offended, yanking Jihoon by the ear. "Are you crazy? What did you say? What did you say? You wanna die?"

Seongjun rolled his eyes, smoke dragging from his lips in a sharp exhale.

I'd have better luck finding him with an actual dolphin than with these idiots.

"The both of you are going to give me a headache, Jesus." He flicked his cigarette to the ground, grinding the ash out beneath his shoe. "It's my shit to sort out….And I don't think any of you would be of any help."

Jihoon and Minhyuk froze mid-grapple, glancing at each other like scolded children before awkwardly pulling apart.

"Okay, okay…" Minhyuk rubbed the back of his neck, then suddenly lit up, his grin wide like he'd struck genius. "Well, the first time he showed up he was at the karaoke, right? What if we just went there to check? If he's not there, we just go in, get someone to buy us drinks. Shit's a win-win either way."

Seongjun tilted his head, raising his brows slowly.

"That's actually… not a bad idea." He stepped in close enough to press the back of his hand to Minhyuk's forehead. "Are you sick? Do we need to call an ambulance?"

Minhyuk let out one sharp laugh, half a scoff, and knocked his hand away with a glare that tried to be deadly but fell flat against Seongjun's smirk.

That smirk cracked into laughter, sharp and careless. He pushed himself off the wall with a shift of his shoulder, hands sinking into his pockets.

"Alright. Let's go find the bastard, I guess."

★ ☆

As they walked toward the karaoke, Seong-Jun and the other two laid it out for the rest of the lackeys — how Taemin looked, what the plan was, where to spread out. Split up, keep your eyes open. If they found him, no bruises, no scratches. Just drag him straight back untouched. Seong-Jun wanted to make him bleed himself. Not one of them dared question it. They nodded along like obedient dogs, taking orders as if he were some military general and not a teenage boy on a Saturday night.

Seong-Jun posted himself outside the karaoke bar, leaning back against the wall while his little soldiers scattered into the night. He didn't move, didn't even pretend to join in the hunt. He just waited, unreadable, like he already knew the world would bend back into his hands sooner or later.

Thirty minutes ticked by before the first one slunk back, then another, and another, each with the same defeated shrug, frustration radiating off them. By the time the last of them dragged their feet in, the whole pack was empty-handed.

Not one of them had a clue.

They'd even asked around, poked and prodded at the locals, tried descriptions. Only a single thread surfaced — a waiter at the restaurant across the street remembered seeing Taemin once. Just once. That night they'd been here before. Never before that, never after. A ghost who appeared and vanished like smoke, as if he'd spawned out of nowhere, a gust of wind nobody wanted and nobody could catch.

Seong-Jun let out an exaggerated sigh, dragging the sound, sharp enough to slice the tension.

"Seriously…" he muttered, low, his voice carrying that dangerous edge like he might just snap at the nearest throat.

Straightening up, he rolled his shoulders loose, eyes narrowing as if even gravity annoyed him.

Jihoon's hand landed on his shoulder — one light pat, some half-assed attempt at grounding him.

"Let's just go in," Jihoon said, casual, almost pleading. "It's a Saturday. Let's just have fun. The kid couldn't have skipped countries. We'll find him eventually."

Seong-Jun's head tilted, eyes slitting at him like knives. That tiny gesture of comfort was enough to sour his expression completely. He swiped Jihoon's hand off, rough and dismissive, rolling his shoulder out like the touch had burned.

"Yeah, whatever."

★ ☆

The evening was stretching into night by the time they stumbled out of karaoke. Most of Seong-Jun's lackeys were wasted—slurring, staggering, laughing at shit that didn't even make sense. The kind of drunk that made you embarrassed to even be seen with them. The only ones who hadn't drowned themselves in cheap liquor were Seong-Jun, Jihoon, and Minhyuk.

Seong-Jun didn't drink. Not because he couldn't, not because he cared about being "responsible." No, it was because he knew what would happen if he went home drunk with Gyu-Jin waiting there. The frustration of not finding Taemin was already boiling under his skin. If Gyu-Jin so much as breathed wrong—*if he said anything that scraped against his nerves*—Seong-Jun would put him through the fucking floor. Leave him a bloody mess. He told himself the reason he didn't drink was simple: he didn't want to catch a charge for attempted murder. Not because he gave a shit about Gyu-Jin. *That's what he forced himself to believe.*

Jihoon and Minhyuk followed his lead like shadows. If Seong-Jun didn't drink, neither did they. Loyalty or fear, maybe both. They weren't like the other lackeys. If Seong-Jun jumped into fire, those two would dive in without blinking. They weren't just his dogs—they were the closest thing he'd ever consider "friends."

Some of the extras peeled off, waved down cabs, disappeared. Others loitered around aimlessly, too drunk to care. Seong-Jun and the two boys stood outside in the cool night air, lighting up for a smoke before heading off.

And that's when it happened.

"Seong-Jun! Long time no see! How's your little boytoy?"

The words cracked across the street like a whip.

Seong-Jun's tongue clicked against his teeth. His eyes snapped in the direction of the voice.

Taemin.

He wasn't hiding. He wasn't running. He was walking straight up to them, casual, like *he'd* been the one searching all night.

Jihoon muttered under his breath, disbelief sharp in his tone. "The fuck…"
Minhyuk hissed right after. "Is this fucker suicidal?"

Taemin stopped right in front of them, practically bouncing on his heels like this was a reunion. A wide grin spread across his face, too familiar, too friendly. His head tilted as he took in Seong-Jun's expression, like he was savoring it.

Seong-Jun's jaw locked. The cigarette between his fingers split clean in two from how hard his fists clenched. His chest felt like he was holding back an explosion, breath caught sharp in his lungs until he finally exhaled. The sound cut like glass.

"The fuck is your problem—"

Taemin's hand dropped onto his shoulder.

"Don't be too mad at me, it's not my fault. Our little Gyu-Jin's just too cute, y'know?"

Something in Seong-Jun's eyes snapped. Darkened. His tongue pressed hard against the inside of his cheek as he stared dead into Taemin's grin.

"Our? *Our* Gyu-Jin?"

In an instant his hand shot out, crushing Taemin's wrist in his grip. He twisted. Hard. The angle was vicious, wrong, the kind of bend that could snap bone in a heartbeat.

Taemin coughed, startled, but then—he laughed. Actually laughed. The sound grated, mockery dripping through the pain.

"Ah, Seong-Jun… we're in public, silly. You can't beat me up in front of everyone. Don't be so hasty, hm? Let's just talk it out—"

Seong-Jun scoffed. Low. Dangerous. Like the sheer stupidity of that statement had offended him.

Then he pulled. Hard. Bone folded, cartilage tore, and the violent crack echoed through the street. Taemin's body jolted, his scream ripping out raw and loud, too sharp to be anything but real agony. Before he could even collapse, Seong-Jun's fist slammed into his face. Blood sprayed, teeth clattered against pavement as he hit the ground, choking on crimson.

"We're in public? When the fuck have I ever cared about shit like that?"

Seong-Jun crouched before Taemin could breathe another word, yanked him up by the collar, and drove his fist into him. Again. And again. Each blow harsher than the last, until Taemin's face was unrecognizable—just a bloodied pulp collapsing under Seong-Jun's knuckles.

Finally, he stopped. Straightened. Looked down at the crumpled mess like he was bored out of his skull. Like this was supposed to be more satisfying than it was.

He scoffed, disgust curling his lip. "Fucking gross." He wiped the blood from his knuckles as if Taemin's touch was something contagious.

Jihoon and Minhyuk stared. Wide-eyed. They'd seen him fight before, sure—but this wasn't a fight. This was an execution he'd only half-finished.

Seong-Jun grabbed Taemin by the collar again, dragging him upright and slamming him against the wall. His voice was low, a snarl.

"So come again. What's your fucking problem?"

Taemin coughed, spitting more blood. Shouldn't have been conscious, but somehow he was. And then—he laughed. Louder. *Unhinged.* He snapped his head towards Seong-Jun. His mouth tore into a grin too wide, too sharp, something that didn't belong on a human face.

"Gyu-Jin doesn't remember me," he gasped between fits of manic laughter. "At the karaoke—looked at me like a complete stranger." His words dissolved into erratic cackles, blood bubbling at his lips. "Make my baby remember me before I leave, or things will get *a lot* harder for him."

The laughter wouldn't stop. It poured out, blood and hysteria choking together, his shoulders jerking as if the sound itself was dragging him apart.

Seong-Jun just stared, baffled. He dropped him like he was diseased, like if he kept touching this freak he'd catch whatever the hell was eating him alive. Taemin curled on the ground, not from pain but from choking on his own laughter, like it was killing him and he didn't care.

"Is this fucker insane…"

Minhyuk and Jihoon were speechless, horror written across their faces. They'd thought Seong-Jun had been too brutal—but Taemin was clearly out of his mind.

Seong-Jun scoffed again, this time sharp and uneasy. He wiped his hand over his face, irritation twitching at his jaw.

“I’m not reasoning with an actual fucking schizo. I don’t care where you’re leaving to, or whatever the fuck you’re rambling about. You’re not in any place to make demands. Just make sure I never see your face again.” His voice cut low, then sharpened as he stepped back. “Or Gyu-Jin.”

That’s when Taemin stilled. His laughter hiccupped, broke, his chest heaving as he sucked for breath. Then, hoarse, he muttered through clenched teeth, “Fucking Park Sun-Hee—*FUCK.”*

The name landed like a blade.

And then he cracked open again, laughter tearing out of him, more hysterical, more unhinged. His voice cracked, screeched, blood spewing with every convulsion. His laughter was so loud people on the crowded street started turning their heads. Taemin didn’t notice. Couldn’t.

“I should stay away?!” His laughter split into a scream, then back into choking hysterics. “Ha… ha… I DON’T HAVE A FUCKING CHOICE!”

Jihoon finally broke, voice tight. “Dude… let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Seong-Jun blinked, snapping back like the world tilted around him. He’d been thrown, not by the mania, but by that name. *Gyu-Jin’s mom’s name.* Taemin had spit it out like a curse.

Exhaling hard, Seong-Jun dragged a hand through his hair and nodded. “Yeah… Jesus fucking Christ…”

They turned their backs on the freak still shrieking in the street. Even as they walked, the sound of Taemin’s laughter chased them, fractured and bleeding through the night until it finally blurred with the distance.

When they were far enough, Minhyuk let out a loud, exaggerated sigh of relief. “Holy shit that was actually creepy. What the actual fuck is that freak on? Seriously—is he on fucking crack?”

Jihoon mirrored it, shoulders finally loosening.
“No, like… I’ve seen that shit in movies. Schizos, people whose brains are just… gone. But seeing it in real life? I never thought I’d—” he cut himself off, shaking his head. “God.”

Seong-Jun stayed silent until the glow of his lighter flicked alive. He inhaled smoke deep into his lungs before muttering, “Yeah. Not gonna lie, that shit weirded me the fuck out. I need a long-ass shower. That freak’s blood’s probably half heroin.”

Minhyuk jabbed Jihoon for a cigarette, whining under his breath until Jihoon tossed him one. He tilted his head back, eyes flicking to the night sky as he spoke.

“I thought finding him would be sick. Like, Seong-Jun would fuck him up, he’d beg, apologize, whatever. But bro…” he exhaled smoke slow, words dragging.

“I kinda wish we didn’t find him at all. I’m gonna have nightmares for days.”

Seong-Jun rolled his eyes, smoke curling from his lips. “Well, we found him. He didn’t say shit worth remembering—none of it made sense to me. But…” he narrowed his eyes, jaw tight. “…maybe Gyu-Jin will know what the fuck he was talking about.”

★ ☆

When Seongjun got home it was already dark. He didn’t know what to expect Gyu-jin to be doing—sleeping, watching TV, or maybe waiting by the door like some dumb puppy.

He unlocked the door. The house was quiet. Too quiet. He called out for Gyu-jin but there was no reply, and that silence hit him harder than he expected. His chest tightened before he even realized he was moving faster, pacing into the living room.

Screen blank. No Gyu-jin.
He basically ran into the kitchen.

And then—there he was.

Arms folded on the marble counter like a makeshift pillow, shoulders rising and falling in that steady rhythm of sleep. Out cold. Peaceful. Obviously waiting so long he’d passed out right there. On the stove across from him, dinner sat untouched, still faintly warm. The smell lingered in the air.

“Why didn’t he just go to bed? Can he really not even do that without asking?”

The thought was sharp, annoyed—but beneath it, something else gnawed. *Relief.*

The food still warm meant he must’ve cooked just to kill the boredom. That realization had Seongjun letting out a long, shaky breath. Only then did it hit him how close he’d been to completely losing his shit. All because, for a split second, he thought Gyu-jin ran.

“Fuck.”
It came out low, muttered under his breath—less like a curse at Gyu-jin and more like frustration at himself.

First he washed his hands, like he couldn’t have whatever Taemin was on lingering on his skin any longer.

He moved closer. And when he really saw Gyu-jin’s face—peaceful, small breaths ghosting past parted lips, soft cheeks, hair fallen into his eyes—something in Seongjun stuttered.

Against all logic, all the garbage of today, *he wanted to just kiss him.* Right there. Like if he could just pull him onto his lap, press his mouth to that delicate face, everything wrong about the day, lingering in his head would go quiet for a second.

His hand moved almost on its own, thumb brushing carefully across Gyu-jin's cheek. Light enough not to wake him rough. He needed him awake—but not startled. Not right now.

Lashes fluttered. Gyu-jin blinked open slowly, gaze unfocused at first before it softened, hazy and small.

"…Ah… I fell asleep… sorry…"

Seongjun's jaw twitched.

Why the fuck was he apologizing?

He just sighed instead, dropping onto the stool beside him. His fingers slid through Gyu-jin's hair. The smaller boy flinched at first, but gradually eased into the touch, tension slipping out of his shoulders.

"We found Taemin."

That name hit like a strike. Gyu-jin's heart stuttered, too fast, too hard.

"Oh. Well… what happened…"
Seongjun's hand stilled in his hair, before threading his fingers out, like part of him wanted to keep quiet. Not tell him. But he spoke anyway.

"I think the kid's actually fucking insane. I beat the shit out of him but he just started laughing like crazy—wouldn't stop. It was fucked. People even started staring. He seriously looked deranged."

Gyu-jin's eyes went wide, staring. He couldn't picture Taemin like that. Not really. Not even after everything. It didn't fit—yet something cold crawled down his spine.

"He was laughing while choking on his own damn blood…" Seongjun's voice dropped, edged with disbelief. "But he was saying shit that didn't make sense—the freak was acting like he knew you before. Said this was all because you couldn't remember him or some shit."

Gyu-jin shifted uncomfortably, confusion clouding his face.

"Huh…? I haven't met him before. The karaoke—that was the first time I ever saw him. I mean… if he was laughing through that, he was probably on something so—"

"Yeah. That's what I thought." Seongjun cut him off. His eyes flicked sharp. "But he said your mom's name. Full name. Like he was pissed at her."

Gyu-jin froze. His breath snagged.

"My mom…?" His hands threaded into his hair, tugging at his scalp like that might pull out a memory, but nothing came. "I really don't remember ever meeting him before that… *what the fuck…"*

The silence that followed was thick. Both of them sitting there, trying to peel apart something that didn't make sense. Then Seongjun's finger tapped against the table, sharp and deliberate.

"Just ask your mom. He seemed pissed at her, so she'll probably know who he is."

Gyu-jin worried at his lip.

"I can't see her… not yet. The marks—they haven't faded."

Seongjun just stood, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, no shit." He started toward the stairs.

Gyu-jin didn't need to be told to follow. Not anymore. He scrambled off the stool, trailing close behind.

Inside the bedroom, Seongjun sat on his side of the bed and opened the drawer of the nightstand. He pulled out Gyu-jin's phone.

Gyu-jin's lips parted, shock flickering across his face—like his chest could burst, not from anger but from raw relief. His phone wasn't smashed.

"You said you smashed it..?"

Seongjun shrugged, tossing it lazily.

"Yeah, retard. Obviously I didn't. You're not staying here forever. If you were, though? I would've actually smashed it." His lip curled. "But you'll probably need it when you leave. Your manners are almost too good too—shit was here the whole time and you didn't even look."

Gyu-jin caught the phone, eyes lighting up as the screen came alive. He darted a glance at Seongjun.

"Thank you… I really thought you smashed it…"

His voice was soft, a smile tugging at his mouth. Seongjun only scoffed.

"Call your mom and give it back. I still don't want you talking to anyone you don't need to."

Gyu-jin nodded instantly. He knew not to argue.

The phone rang barely once before his mom picked up.

"Gyujin-ah! Aw, my sweet boy, I've missed you so much. Why haven't you called? Has the trip been keeping you this busy?"

His chest squeezed, guilt curling tight. He couldn't tell her the truth. *But god*, hearing her voice—it almost cracked him.

“Ah… yes—yes, it’s been really busy, sorry…” He faltered. Then steadied. “Omma… I have a question. It may seem weird, but I really need you to answer.”

“Go ahead, dear! No question’s too much for my son.”

He swallowed hard.

“Did I ever know a boy called Taemin? He’s got… dark brown hair… and… he has a really warm smile…”

Seongjun’s jaw clenched at that part, eyes flashing. Gyu-jin flicked him a quick look and mouthed a tiny, desperate sorry.

There was a pause. His mother hummed in thought, then:

“Ah! Yes… that boy. Oh, that boy—he had the warmest smile. I’m sure he grew up into a wonderful young man.”

Seongjun snorted. “Yeah, don’t get your hopes up.”

Gyu-jin shot him a pleading glare to shut up, but his mom kept talking.

“Aigo, I really hope he got the help he needed… that sick boy…”

Gyu-jin’s face paled.

“Wait, wait—what do you mean..? Sick..?”

“Oh, right, right, you don’t recall him. Let me explain…”

Her tone shifted, careful. “You boys were friends. He didn’t go to your school but you said you met him at the park or somewhere… He’d come over and play at our house sometimes but… gosh, I never really liked him. There was always something off about him…”

Gyu-jin’s gaze flicked worriedly to Seongjun. He only raised his brows and shrugged, silent.

“Ah, one day you came home rattled. You had that look—like when you’d watch horror films.” She chuckled softly. “You still don’t like those…”

“Omma…” Gyu-jin muttered, embarrassed.

“Okay, okay, Gyuji-ah. But you had a card in your hands. Looked like a birthday card at first—had a drawing of you two, singing together as stick men. Cute, at first glance. But the message inside was… strange. All it said was: ‘Gyu-jin, be sure you remember me when I’m gone. If you don’t, I’ll make sure you remember in a way you’ll never forget.’ There were smiley faces everywhere. Creepy. You never told me why it scared you so bad.

“But the next day, I heard from parents in the neighborhood—some child had been sent to a mental hospital. Everyone was talking, because it was so young. I found out it was him. *That boy.*

“And that card… it worried me. I thought maybe he’d do something if you really forgot him, so I filed a restraining order. His parents actually agreed when I showed them. They didn’t explain why he was sent away, but I didn’t pry.

“But, Gyu-jin dear… why are you asking about him now? Did you see that boy again?”

Gyu-jin froze. Too long. Seongjun jabbed him in the side, sharp, urging.

“Ah. Y—no, no, I didn’t… I just—”

Seongjun snatched the phone out of his hand.
“Sorry lady. Phone time’s up.”

And he hung up.

Gyujin blinked at him.

“You—” his voice cracked off into nothing, and then he just dropped backwards onto the bed, dragging a pillow over his face with a groan that sounded more like despair than exhaustion.

Seongjun leaned back against the mattress with that lazy, unbothered weight of his, sliding Gyujin’s phone into his pocket like it had always belonged there.

“I guess I wasn’t wrong about him being mentally insane.” His tone was almost mocking, bored. “The kid escaped a fucking mental asylum.”

His eyes flicked sideways, catching the sight of Gyujin hiding like he could smother his own brain with a pillow. That pathetic attempt at shutting out reality.

Seongjun yanked the pillow away and broke a low chuckle.

Gyujin shot upright, eyes wide and voice cracking.

“Seongjun, it’s not funny… he basically—like… what if he—”

The words tangled and died, strangled by another frustrated groan as he dropped back again, burying himself in the sheets like he wanted to disappear.

Seongjun’s lips curled in that sharp, humorless laugh of his, closer to a scoff than anything real. He grabbed a fistful of Gyujin’s shirt and dragged him upright with an ease that made the smaller boy stumble into him.

“He said he was leaving,” Seongjun sneered, his voice low, cutting. “He probably knows once you put the pieces together you’ll remember the fucking restraining order or whatever. Calm down, idiot. He can’t touch you.”

Gyujin’s shoulders slackened, though his fingers twitched nervously as he pushed the hair from his face, tucking it behind his ear.

“Then… why would he want me to remember him?”

“Fuck knows.” Seongjun leaned back, one arm braced behind his head like he had all the answers and none of the worries. “No point trying to untangle the mind of some freak who broke out of the psych ward. Guy’s a nutcase, not capable of thinking straight.”

He gestured lazily at the mattress, as if ordering Gyujin to relax too.

“Yeah… right… okay…”

Gyujin exhaled shakily and rolled onto his side, curling into the blanket. But when he turned his head back, his face was a little too close to Seongjun’s. His voice was softer, fragile at the edges.

“Thank you… Seongjun. Really. Even if you only did this because he annoyed you…”

A smirk tugged at Seongjun’s mouth—taunting, slow. He lifted his hand, thumb brushing against Gyujin’s bottom lip like he was testing the softness.

“Yeah. You’re gonna have to pay me back for that. Listen to me forever. Do everything I want.”

Gyujin’s lashes fluttered, his gaze dropping down. His voice came out in a murmur, almost shamefully quiet.

“I already do that.”

Seongjun hummed, not because he was considering it, but because he liked the sound of Gyujin admitting it.

“Nah. Not like that.”

He pulled his thumb away and sat up against the bedframe, tilting his head with that sharp-eyed command written all over his face.

“Sit up.”

Even if he didn’t want to, Gyujin obeyed, slow and careful, folding his legs under him as he turned toward Seongjun. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do—only that disobeying wasn’t an option.

Seongjun raked a hand through his hair, then tapped Gyujin’s cheek, a little too sharp to be playful, a little too soft to be a slap.

“Need to test something.”

Two fingers brushed against Gyujin’s bottom lip, deliberate, taunting.

“Suck.”

Heat shot up Gyujin’s neck, painting his ears red. He froze, lips parting slightly, but he didn’t move.

“Now, Gyujin.”

His hands trembled in his lap before he finally moved, small palms wrapping around Seongjun’s much larger hand. The contrast was embarrassingly evident. He guided Seongjun’s fingers into his own mouth himself, parting his lips with a shaky breath.

The taste of skin, the weight of fingers on his tongue—he’d only ever seen things like this on screens. But now, with Seongjun’s sharp eyes burning holes into him, every movement felt raw, too fast, too real.

His eyes dropped, refusing to meet Seongjun’s gaze. Drool slicked Seongjun’s fingers as he suckled carefully, slow and uncertain. His face was already flushed, but the heat worsened every time Seongjun deliberately pressed deeper, watching the smaller boy’s breath catch on a muffled whimper.

When the fingers pushed too far, Gyujin gagged—his eyes squeezing shut as saliva spilled from the corner of his mouth. He tried to jerk back, but Seongjun only shoved deeper, too fast, too much, cruel and deliberate.

Gyujin flinched hard, coughing as he clutched at his throat when Seongjun finally pulled out.

“Yeah,” Seongjun drawled, “thought so. Your gag reflex sucks.”

Gyujin snapped his head up, eyes glassy, sleeve swiping at his mouth.

“Obviously!—” His voice was almost a yell, panicked, before it dropped into a hurried whisper. “…I haven’t done anything like that before…”

Seongjun’s smirk only widened.

“You think I don’t know that?” His hand dropped onto Gyujin’s head, patting almost mockingly. “That’s the point. Pure. Untouched. I like that.”

Gyujin’s face went hot enough to burn. He turned away sharply, puffing out an heated breath before sinking into the blankets like he could vanish.

Seongjun rolled his eyes, not out of disdain—more because the reaction was so easy, so predictable.

“It’s whatever. I’ll fix that.”

Gyujin jolted, whipping back toward him.

“Huh?!”

“Sleep, fuckgyu.” Seongjun had already turned, stretching out into the bed like the conversation was over.

Gyujin covered his face with his hand, muffling another groan before crawling into the blankets too.

The silence stretched. And then Seongjun's voice cut through it, casual, cruel in its ease.

"Oh—and I won't hurt you while you're here. Not if you're good for me."

He didn't even bother turning toward him. Just said it like a throwaway remark.

Gyujin's breath stuttered, body curling tighter into the covers.

"…I'll be good…"
It came out muffled, almost inaudible against the fabric. But Seongjun heard. Of course he heard.

They drifted off like that. Seongjun didn't get that kiss he'd wanted to burn the night clean, but this—this was just as good. The room sank into darkness, thick with something unspoken, a warmth neither of them could name.

The week crawled by. Not unbearably slow, not fast either—just dragging enough for Gyu-jin to notice every shift, every mood. And somehow, *Seongjun actually kept his word*. He didn't really hurt him. Not like before. Almost softer. Almost.

When he was pissed, Seongjun still snapped—shoves that sent him stumbling, slaps that stung and burned. But they stopped short of bruises. Always short, like he was holding himself back from going too far. Restraining himself in a way that didn't make sense.

With anyone else, the air would've been constant glass-cracking tension. But Gyu-jin was used to it. This was Seongjun. This was how it always was. He didn't expect anything different. Didn't expect him to change just because a few days passed. And yet—something had. Slight, but real. A softness creeping in where it didn't belong.

That's when it got suffocating, when the air tilted off-balance. Seongjun would check the fading marks on his skin, asking if they still hurt, making him lift his shirt or turn his face.

His voice carried something too close to concern, even if his expression twisted a second later into something sharp, dismissive, *cruel*—like he had to correct himself, like showing care for Gyu-jin was a mistake he couldn't afford.

The strangest part was how normal little things started to feel. Sometimes they brushed their teeth side by side. Sometimes Gyu-jin woke up with Seongjun's arm thrown heavy around him, his hand sliding deliberately under his shirt, skin on skin. He didn't jerk away anymore. Sometimes Seongjun put something on the TV that wasn't something Gyu-jin couldn't stand, and they watched without speaking.

Not comfortable. Not safe. Never soft. But different.

They talked more, in Seongjun's way. He complained about teachers, about kids who pissed him off, about Minhyuk and Jihoon being idiots. He bragged about fights, about who he'd fucked up that day. Gyu-jin would listen, nod, throw out clipped comments where he could. Careful not to say the wrong thing, though even then, Seongjun always got mad anyway. Mad when his reactions didn't match what he wanted. Like Gyu-jin should be able to read his mind, anticipate every twist of it.

That was the rhythm. The cycle. And maybe it would've been *more unsettling* if things did go perfectly. If they acted like some couple. If it was suddenly normal.

When the week passed, it was already Saturday morning, steam still clinging to his skin, Gyu-jin stepped out of the shower. Damp hair clung to his neck, water trailing down his bare chest. He was wearing pajama pants that weren't his—they were Seongjun's.

His eyes lifted, catching on the older boy buckling his belt. Their gazes snagged, heavy, neither of them ever offered anything like a "good morning." Seongjun just told him when to cook, when to get up. At night he just told him to sleep—or said something sharp enough to make him want to disappear into the dark.

Seongjun crossed the space, hand lifting to brush over Gyu-jin's collarbone. The touch was light, but Gyu-jin still flinched. Not enough to pull away. Just enough for Seongjun to notice. His fingers lingered before sliding back.

"Basically healed now… can't keep you here for fucking ever." He paused. "I guess I'll let you leave tomorrow."

His voice wasn't smug, not his usual teasing bite. It almost sounded reluctant, like the words tasted wrong in his mouth. But he knew better. Keeping Gyu-jin longer would only raise questions—outside, sure, but maybe inside too. Questions neither of them were ready for.

Gyu-jin's expression caught with something close to disdain, but his eyes fell anyway. He knew he had to leave. He wanted to crawl out the window in the beginning, wanted to escape at any cost. But somewhere in the days that passed, he started closing those windows himself.

Seongjun caught the shift, and it made him pause. He didn't expect disappointment. Not from Gyu-jin. Not about leaving. He ran a hand through his hair, like he could shake the weight off, then shoved Gyu-jin's shoulder.

"Since these marks have faded you can be in public. Useless for you to run anymore. We'll go to the mall in a bit—get you some shit to wear for when you leave."

The words dragged Gyu-jin's focus back to him. His fingers twisted in his wet hair, nervous tic he couldn't kill.

"We don't have to… I'll just wear the clothes I came with."

"Burnt them." The answer came flat. Empty.

Gyu-jin froze, feet shifting against the floor. He couldn't tell when Seongjun was being serious anymore.

"Are you—"

"Yes, I actually did this time." Seongjun's eyes cut sharp, his tone darker. "Are you forgetting who touched you in those?"

The breath stuttered out of Gyu-jin, shaky and uneven. His chest tightened as he nodded, slow. The irritation in Seongjun's voice was clear enough. No space to push further.

"…I know… sorry…"

★ ☆

The mall was blinding—too bright, too loud, too crowded. The noise slammed into Gyu-jin's ears like he'd forgotten what other people even sounded like.

Every time he drifted too far, Seongjun's hand snapped around his wrist, tugging him back just enough to remind him where he stood. Not hand-holding. Not even close. Just control, sharp and unspoken, loosened as soon as the point landed.

If his nerves weren't crawling at the fact he took Gyu-jin out into a public setting, Seongjun would've been bored out of his mind. Instead, he just got annoyed. Gyu-jin couldn't pick a single store. Kept pacing in and out, eyes darting, indecisive like an idiot.

Eventually, Seongjun's patience snapped. He shoved him into the nearest shop, his voice cutting like glass.

"I'm letting you pick something for yourself because if I did, I'd dress you like a fucking nun. So stop fucking around and choose."

Gyu-jin flinched at the shove, then—*God help him*—he almost smiled. The corners of his mouth tugged at the stupid comment.

"Like a nun…" he muttered, soft laugh under his breath.

Seongjun's eyes narrowed, his scoff sharp, irritated, body language radiating impatience.

"Just hurry the fuck up. And don't pick anything you know would piss me off."

Gyu-jin nodded too fast, pretending he understood, then darted away down the aisles.

What would even piss him off? Something flashy? Anything that brought attention? Yeah… probably. I don't wear shit like that anyway, so the fuck is he on.

When he finally circled back, Seongjun was slouched against the wall, scrolling his phone, expression already on the verge of snapping. He shoved it into his pocket the second Gyu-jin

approached.

“Fucking finally.”

His eyes flicked over the choice: plain white tee, oversized gray hoodie, denim jeans.

> *Gyu-jin did good, nothing that would bring unnecessary attention. Almost earned him an audible “good job.” Almost.*

Seongjun nodded once, slow, then grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the counter.

They didn’t linger around. He kept them moving toward the exit until they stopped near the bathrooms.

“Need to take a piss.”

For a second, he almost pulled Gyu-jin in with him—just out of habit, because the thought of letting him out of sight scraped at his nerves. But then his gaze caught on a little toy stall across the walkway. Balloons, plushies, cheap trinkets. Some old lady was sitting behind it, smiling too warmly at every kid that passed.

Gyu-jin followed his eyes and hesitated. “Should I wait there…?”

He barely got the words out before Seongjun’s fingers locked on his wrist again, dragging him over. If he had a leash, he’d tie him to the damn stand. When they reached it, Seongjun plastered on that fake-friendly mask he wore for teachers, the counterfeit kind of smile that made Gyu-jin’s skin crawl.

“What can I do for you boys? Want to look around?” the lady asked.

“Yes ma’am,” Seongjun said smoothly. He clamped an arm over Gyu-jin’s shoulders, too tight to be casual, too staged to be affectionate. “My friend here will look around for me. And if he walks away, call security. His mom gave me strict orders not to let him get lost—he’s a bit retarded.”

The woman just laughed softly, brushing it off like he was joking. “Oh, I get it dear, I have children of my own, so I—”

“Thanks lady.” Seongjun cut her off, already turning away like her voice wasn’t worth his time.

She didn’t even look offended. Just chuckled and turned her warmth on Gyu-jin.

“You’ve got a good friend, sweetheart. Don’t be too mad at him, he’s just looking out for you.”

The glare Gyu-jin shot at Seongjun’s back could’ve cut through steel. “He’s not my friend…” he muttered, eyes dropping to the table of toys instead.

“Ah… I thought not, I assumed so when you looked like you were holding hands when you walked up—”

Gyu-jin’s eyes snapped wide, his face heating. “Nonono—it’s not that either—”

“It’s fine, dear. Times have changed. I’m not judging.”

His hand dragged down his face.

Are old people blind in their thoughts too?

“Yeah yeah…”

Better to drop it. He wasn’t seeing her again anyway.

He let his eyes skim the stall until one plushie caught him off guard: a little deer, chibi-style, stupidly cute. He reached for it, fingers brushing the fabric—then a kid snatched it right out from under him.

The brat stuck his tongue out at him. *Childish. Meaningless.* Still, it pricked under his skin. He rolled his eyes, trying to let it go.

Then—

“Hey—!”

His head snapped back. Seongjun had ripped the plushie straight from the kid’s hands, glaring down at him like he was nothing. The kid’s lip wobbled.

“Go fuck off to your mom.”

The kid bolted in tears. Seongjun didn’t even blink, just tossed the plush at Gyu-jin before shoving cash onto the stall. The woman looked stunned, then covered it with another warm smile as she slid the money away.

Gyu-jin stared at the plush in his hands like it was a live bomb. Or something rare and breakable, too fragile for him.

Seongjun’s laugh broke sharp, low. The kind that sounded like a scoff but wasn’t meant to sting.

“Looks like you.”

Gyu-jin’s head jerked up, words fumbling and failing. He ducked back down, biting his lip around the smile that slipped through anyway. The woman sighed, smiling at them.

“You boys make a lovely couple. It’s heartwarming to see—but young man, you shouldn’t do that to children—”

“Yah. Just take the money and shut up.”

He yanked Gyu-jin by the wrist, dragging him off.

Gyu-jin twisted back, muttering a rushed “thank you, ma’am,” then quieter, *“...sorry.”*

★ ☆

They walked on in silence, but it wasn’t just “comfortable,” “tolerable” like usual. It felt… warm. Like maybe, for a minute, they were both okay with it. Gyu-jin’s hand kept grazing Seongjun’s, brushing then pulling back, brushing again, like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to take the risk.

Seongjun noticed. Of course he noticed. Every damn time.

He let out a sharp sigh, full of irritation.
“If you want to hold my hand, don’t be a fucking pussy. Just do it.”

Gyu-jin froze, pulse spiking. Then—*slowly*—he threaded his fingers through Seongjun’s. Careful, hesitant.

Seongjun immediately squeezed too hard, just to see the wince. Their eyes met; Gyu-jin’s face flushed, snapping away too fast. Seongjun scoffed, but he didn’t let go. Neither of them did.

For once, it wasn’t forced.

And that’s when the world cracked.

Up ahead, Youngdong stopped in his tracks, ice cream slipping in his grip.

Gyu-jin’s stomach dropped. His hand ripped away instantly, distance slamming back between them. His pulse hammered.

“The fuck was that?” Seongjun’s voice sliced sharp. He grabbed for Gyu-jin’s wrist again, but the boy jerked back, panic breaking through.

“Does this idiot think I won’t hit him just because we’re in public?”

Seongjun’s eyes darkened, narrowing as he reached again—

Gyu-jin’s frantic gesture cut him off, pointing forward without pointing, begging him to notice.

Seongjun’s gaze slid to Youngdong, then back to him. His tongue rolled against his teeth, irritation stamped across his face like none of it mattered.

He reached out, this time it didn't look like he was just going to grab his wrist, and Gyu-jin tensed, squeezing his eyes shut—

—but then the sky cracked. A drop of rain. Another. Within seconds, the roof of the mall roared with downpour.

Something shifted in Seongjun's expression. The storm washed out the sharp edge of punishment, *for now*. Replaced with something else entirely.

His hand only landed in Gyu-jin's hair. Threaded through the boy's soft strands carefully, like he was trying to be gentle.

"Whatever, Gyu-jin. Let's go. I'm not catching a cold because of you."

Gyu-jin's heart slowed, confused, unsteady. He couldn't process how strange the day had been. Seongjun had laughed, touched him without threat, even let him pull away.

Maybe—*just maybe*—he really was changing.

★ ☆

Seongjun dropped onto the couch the second they got home, like the whole day had wrung him out and left him hollow.

His head tilted, eyes dragging lazily toward Gyu-jin crouched on the floor. The boy was carefully tucking the plushie into the bag with his clothes, movements too gentle, too precious—like it was the only thing holding him together. Seongjun watched longer than he should've.

"Gyu-jin. Come here."

His voice cut through the quiet, low and unbothered. He patted the spot beside him.

Gyu-jin jolted, scrambling over without hesitation, sinking onto the couch like he'd been waiting for the order.

"Today was really fun.. I—"

"Yeah, whatever." Seongjun's tone flattened it instantly. "Take off your shirt. Need to make sure you're good for tomorrow."

The words knocked the air from Gyu-jin's chest. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, tried to steady himself.

"Yeah. Still the same."

He pulled the shirt over his head, fingers falling idly at his sides.

Seongjun's gaze swept over him—slow, deliberate, eating him up in silence. His hands brushed against Gyu-jin's waist, deceptively light, almost tender. Almost like he was checking if he still hurt.

But that wasn't what this was. *Not at all.*

In an instant, Seongjun's grip tightened, crushing into his sides, and he hauled Gyu-jin up, throwing him over his shoulder like he weighed nothing.

A startled yelp tore from Gyu-jin's throat, his breath caught sharp, heart hammering erratic. Thrashing uselessly against Seongjun's hold.

"S—what the hell?! What are you doing??"

The taller boy didn't even flinch, didn't acknowledge him. He carried him up the stairs with a steady, unhurried stride, like he wasn't holding someone who was panicking, twisting, begging to be put down.

At the landing, Seongjun tossed him aside without care. Gyu-jin barely had time to catch his footing before his head snapped viciously to the side. Pain exploded across his face as Seongjun's fist cracked against his cheek.

He hit the floor hard. Metallic tang flooded his mouth, copper on his tongue. Too harsh. Too much. *Even for Seongjun*. His lungs heaved, frantic, his chest aching with each desperate breath.

His head jerked up, eyes wide, burning.
"What the fuck?!" The words tore out, a raw yell. Real anger.

Why didn't he see it coming? Maybe because Seongjun had actually played human today. *Almost acted like he gave a shit.* And now this—like he wanted to snap his nose in two.

Seongjun's face didn't flicker. Blank. Empty. He only stepped forward, yanking Gyu-jin up with brutal force and slamming him against the wall. His shoulder cracked under the impact, a sharp cry slipping out before he could swallow it. Fingers dug cruel into the bone, crushing pressure that promised to break.

Then Seongjun's hand tangled in his hair, jerking his head back until their eyes locked.
"I knew my puppy learned how to bark," Seongjun sneered, voice low and venomous, "but these little acts of defiance? Really pissing me off, fuckgyu." He leaned in closer, too close, enough to feel the heat of his breath. "Do I have to remind you who the fuck you're glaring at right now?"

Gyu-jin's chest tightened, frustration burning under his ribs. He shoved back, hard, but Seongjun didn't budge an inch. All he could do was wrench his head away, refusing to meet those eyes, refusing to give him that satisfaction.

"*You said you wouldn't fucking hurt me…*" His voice cracked, trembling on the edge of breaking.

Seongjun tilted his head, cool and unamused, like the words didn't deserve his time. "Did I?" His laugh was sharp, humorless, cutting straight through. "Why the hell would I say that?"

In one sharp movement, Seongjun slammed the glass balcony door open, the frame rattling so hard it was a miracle it didn't shatter. His hand clamped around Gyu-jin's arm, fingers biting deep, and before Gyu-jin could even react he was shoved—no, thrown—with the full weight of Seongjun's strength onto the balcony. The door snapped shut behind him, cutting the world in two.

The rain hit like punishment, heavy and violent, drenching him in seconds. Gyu-jin stumbled hard, his feet skidding on the slick tiles, nearly going down. His chest was already tight, heart pounding so hard it felt lodged in his throat.

His knuckles rapped once against the glass—

"Seongjun!" He snapped it out harsh, actually angry, but the sound faltered, shivering apart with panic. "I'm s-sorry—Seongjun! Please, it's freezing, I—I'm sorry…please—" The urgency in the pounding of the door was more than visible. His fists pounded against the door, urgency more visible with every hit.

Seongjun tilted his head, watching him with the lazy detachment of someone waiting for a dog to learn its lesson. No pity, no urgency—just a cool dismissal in his gaze.

He tapped once, almost bored, against the glass.

"Freeze, then. You should've listened."

The words hit harder than the rain. Gyu-jin's pleas kept spilling out anyway, thin and broken, his body trembling against the relentless gusts. His hair stuck to his face, soaked to the root, his lips paling as his skin flushed faint pink like ice beneath the surface. His eyelashes clumped together with rain—or maybe tears—he couldn't tell anymore. His chest burned with panic, with the raw urge not to break in front of him. But Seongjun had picked the balcony for a reason. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Trapped.

The rain wasn't just cold; it was suffocating. He couldn't tell if he was shaking from the chill or from the way Seongjun—

—Just barely glanced over, lips tugging downward in a look of bored disdain, as if the shivering boy at the door was only proving his point. He kept checking the time, as if testing how long Gyu-jin could scream before his voice went out.

Gyu-jin's fingers slipped down the glass, leaving streaks of water. His chest heaved, his breath rattled. One last shaky exhale. His body wouldn't stop trembling. The thought crawled into his head like poison: *Begging is useless.*

And that was when Seongjun finally moved. Not with pity, not with mercy, but with a cruel shift out of his boredom. He stepped closer, expression flat as if he were watching some bug fight for air under glass. His fingers dragged idly along the door as he passed, each tap deliberate, loud against the rain.

Gyu-jin's chest seized. His eyes darted. Panic clawed back into him with full force.

Did he just fucking walk away?
Fuck—is he going to leave me out here all night?

His hand scraped through his soaked hair, over his face, frantic, like he could physically claw the panic out of himself. His body refused to stop shaking.

He stilled eventually. He had to. It felt like defeat leaking into his bones. His back slid against the balcony wall until he sank down, arms wrapping across his chest, breath trembling unevenly as he tried to fix his body into something that didn't look like begging.

He stopped fighting.
Just—
Gave up.

And then the door crashed open.

A hand clamped his arm and yanked him forward before his mind caught up. The world lurched as his body was hurled back inside, tossed onto the floor with brutal force like he weighed nothing.

He hit hard. His palms skidded against the flooring, scraping as he caught himself, chest seizing with the shock. His eyes blew wide, but he didn't look up. Didn't give Seongjun the satisfaction of seeing how much of a wreck he was. His soaked hair veiled his face, dripping shadows over his eyes. A shaky breath slipped out instead of a scream.

"…You're fucking insane."

Seongjun's reply was smooth, almost amused.
"Really now? …Didn't notice."

Gyu-jin's chest burned, nerves screaming as if his body itself wanted him to lash out, to fight. To smash Seongjun's skull in. But his lungs just dragged uneven breaths, pulling him back to the ground. He wasn't going to give him the visible victory of breaking.

Seongjun stood over him, watching, calculating. Watching the tremble in his shoulders, the way he looked small and helpless curled on the floor. His lips twitched in something close to contempt.

He exhaled sharply.
"Get up."

When Gyu-jin didn't move fast enough, Seongjun seized his arm again. Gyu-jin recoiled instantly, pulling back, his body resisting out of sheer instinct. But Seongjun's grip was

immovable, lifting him like dead weight and slamming him against the wall with ease.

His hand shot to Gyu-jin's throat, pinning him there. The pressure was crushing, almost lifting him off his feet. Gyu-jin choked immediately, the sound ragged, his fingers clawing at Seongjun's wrist but finding no give, no mercy.

"I'm telling you this once," Seongjun's voice was low, serrated, "I don't care where we are. I don't give a fuck who's around. If I tell you to do something, you fucking do it. The fact you can still resist isn't that bad—means you won't let anyone else touch you."

The hand shifted suddenly, sliding up to clamp around his jaw. The release on his throat made Gyu-jin cough harshly, dragging in broken air. His chest was heaving, face flushed red, wet lashes brimming with tears he hated giving him. His head tilted aside on reflex, but Seongjun's grip forced him back, fingers digging in until his face tilted up, until his gaze locked directly onto his.

"But don't *ever* try to fucking stop me from touching what's mine."

The grip on his jaw tightened until it burned. He winced, mouth parting, but words wouldn't come. Couldn't. Any sound would break into chokes. His face was flushed scarlet, his chest trembling as he panted through his teeth. But even then—he didn't drop his eyes. Didn't submit.

Seongjun finally let go. His hand fell away, and Gyu-jin's jaw trembled with the release, pain lingering sharp in his skin. His eyes glossed over, watery.

Then—
a sharp slap snapped his head to the side. Fast, stinging, deliberate—like Seongjun was slapping focus back into him.

"Are you sorry? Do you feel like fucking shit?"

Their eyes locked again. Gyu-jin's chest hitched. One tear slipped free, then another, his bottom lip trembling as he sucked in a breath that came out ragged.

"I really…" His voice cracked, broke into a choked sob. More tears slipped, refusing to stop.
"…I really fucking hate you."

His voice was weak. Barely held together. He turned away, unable to keep his face up, tears streaking hot down his cheeks, dripping along his chin.

Seongjun just stared. Blinked once.

Gyu-jin was crying. *Really crying*—pathetically, raw. His face burned red, nose tinted, small whines catching in his sobs. His lashes clumped, his entire face and hair damp, his shoulders quivering despite the heat rising off him.

Seongjun muttered under his breath, more to himself than him.
"Fucking hell."

In an instant, Seongjun's hands were on him—fingers clamped tight around his jaw, dragging his face up. But this time it wasn't just the bruising grip.

It was his mouth.

Seongjun's lips crashed against Gyu-jin's, all force and no warning. Gyu-jin gasped into it, eyes flying open, but the sound never left him—the taller boy swallowed it whole, devouring the startled noise like it belonged to him.

Fingers slid rough from Gyu-jin's jaw to the nape of his neck, pressing down along the line of his collarbone, pinning him there with nothing but touch.

The kiss wasn't soft, wasn't violent either. It was worse than either of those. Possessive. Branding. A claim he wasn't asking for, just taking.

And Gyu-jin didn't fight it. *He should have.* Every alarm in his brain screamed *push him off, hit him, break free.* But his body betrayed him. *He even didn't want to.* He kissed back, small hands curling helplessly into Seongjun's shirt as though clinging would steady him. He rose up onto his toes, leaning into the taller boy's height.

Seongjun noticed. Of course he noticed. His smirk ghosted through the kiss as he bit into Gyu-jin's lip hard enough to draw a whimper, forcing his lips apart. That was all it took. His tongue slid in, greedy, tangling against Gyu-jin's, while his other hand dropped heavy to his throat, shoving him harder into the wall.

Gyu-jin let out a noise—not quite a wince, not quite a whine—and threaded shaking fingers into Seongjun's hair, tugging weakly as if that could anchor him.

Seongjun's thumb traced circles against his tear-damp cheek, almost mockingly gentle, while his other hand pressed steady against his throat. He tightened, just slightly, just enough to feel the way Gyu-jin's breath faltered against his palm.

And then he pulled back.

Gyu-jin's lips trembled at the contact, a soft, needy sound breaking loose when it was gone. Seongjun didn't move far; his breath was still there, hot and ragged against his cheek, suffocating in its closeness.

"Say you're sorry." His voice was low, hoarse, every word cut with sharp edges. "Tell me you're sorry and I'll stop."

Gyu-jin's chest heaved, lips swollen and cheeks burning. His voice trembled when it slipped out, thin and small between shallow pants.

"...You don't have to..." His lashes fluttered, eyes glazed, locking desperately onto Seongjun's. His voice broke with the air leaving his lungs. *"...you don't have to stop..."*

Seongjun froze, staring at the pathetic mess in front of him—the desperation dripping from his expression, the way resistance had shattered into something needy, pliant, humiliating. *He looked small. Weak. Wrecked.*

“Fuck…”

Seongjun’s fist tangled in his hair, yanking his head back up before crashing their mouths together again. Gyu-jin let out a choked sob at the sudden, painful grip, but he still kissed back, clutching at Seongjun’s shoulders like he’d fall apart if he let go.

When Seongjun broke away, his breath scorched down Gyu-jin’s skin, ragged and hot. And before Gyu-jin could even comprehend the loss, his jaw was caught again, his head forced to the side. Teeth sank into the exposed curve of his throat.

Gyu-jin’s voice betrayed him—a sharp, high whimper cracked out, embarrassed and raw. His panting came quicker, uneven.

“…those little noises—they’re really fucking hot.”

Seongjun’s finger dragged over the mark, slow, savoring. *Not enough*. He bit down again, lower this time, closer to his collarbone.

Gyu-jin whimpered, his voice thin and broken, shoulders trembling against the wall. Even if he wanted to pull away, he couldn’t. Seongjun’s grip on his jaw held him in place, helpless, vulnerable. Exposed only for him.

The final bite lingered, Seongjun humming low against reddened skin, eyes heavy as they traced every mark left behind. His marks. His little toy.

Gyu-jin’s breath hitched once, uneven, before Seongjun’s hand caught both his wrists and slammed them above his head, pinning them easily in one grip. A startled gasp slipped out, but it was silenced instantly as Seongjun’s mouth crushed into his again.

The kiss burned with hunger now, frantic and desperate. Neither pulled away. Their tongues tangled, messy, impatient, while Seongjun’s hand shifted Gyu-jin’s face wherever he wanted him, controlling even the angle of his submission.

When he finally tore back, it was only barely. Just to breathe. His lips hovered, still brushing against Gyu-jin’s when the word slipped out. Soft. Unintentional.

“Hyung…”

Seongjun stilled. He wouldn’t have heard it if he hadn’t been so close, but the tiny word landed like a spark.

“You have no idea how hard you made me already,” his voice cracked out low, rough, “seeing you crying like that… and this—*fuck—”*

He dropped Gyu-jin’s wrists, dragging a hand instead through the smaller’s hair, slower now, softer, like he needed the contact to steady himself more than to comfort.

“Stops here…You haven’t earned it. Haven’t forgotten you pissed me off today.”

Gyu-jin bit down on his lip, nodding once, small and obedient, disappointment bleeding obvious in his voice.
“…okay…”

Seongjun let out a single laugh, sharp but softened at the edges, like fondness slipped in despite himself. He looked fucking cute—flushed, pouting, all disappointed like someone had just stolen something from him.

Seongjun bent to his level, smirk tugging at his lips.
“Don’t look so fucking disappointed.”

Gyu-jin startled faintly, but Seongjun’s teasing expression didn’t let him run with it.

“Take a shower and come to bed.”

Seongjun never bothered waking Gyu-jin up. He never had to. But today, Gyu-jin woke with clothes being shoved into his face.

He groaned, tugging the fabric off his head, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His vision sharpened just enough to catch Seongjun leaning against the wardrobe, arms crossed, watching him like he was waiting to see if he’d move on his own.

“Leave early,” Seongjun said flatly, like it was nothing, “before I change my mind.”

Gyu-jin blinked, brain too sluggish to piece it together.

“…too early…” he mumbled into the pillow, burrowing back into the blankets like he had a death wish.

Seongjun rolled his eyes, pushed off the wall, and grabbed his ear hard enough to make him jolt upright.

“It’s 11 a.m. dumbass.”

Gyu-jin’s eyes went wide. He scrubbed his face furiously, like that would shake the sleep off.
“Why didn’t you wake me up…?”

Seongjun dropped lazily onto the bed beside him, stretching out like he owned the place.
“When have I ever woken you up?”

Gyu-jin opened his mouth, but nothing came. He couldn’t argue with that—so he didn’t. He just swung his legs off the bed and dragged himself toward the shower, swallowing down the sting of the answer.

When they finally made it to the door, Gyu-jin trailed behind, clutching that stupid plushie tight against his chest like it was the only anchor he had.

Seongjun stopped suddenly, turning on him with sharp eyes.
"I want you to stop hanging out with that friend. Youngdong, or whatever the fuck."

The words hit harder than a slap. Gyu-jin froze, his face draining color.
"What…? He's been my friend for years—I can't just—"

"Yeah. Great fucking friend," Seongjun cut in, voice cold and razor-sharp. "Whose fault was it I had to knock sense into you with my fist across your face? Remind me."

Gyu-jin swallowed hard, throat burning. He wanted to protest—wanted to defend Youngdong, wanted to defend himself—but the weight of Seongjun's glare made the words rot before they even formed. He told himself he'd just lie. Numbly nod, agree, and keep being friends with Youngdong in secret. It was safer than a fight.

"…Okay. I'll stop talking to him."

Seongjun's mouth curled into a grin, all sharp teeth. He pinched Gyu-jin's nose like he was a pet being rewarded.
"Good boy."

The constant heat Gyu-jin would feel every single time Seongjun would do things like this was getting unbearable. But it was unintentional, came before he could stop it.

"Called a designated driver to drop you off, don't really want anyone touching you on your way home if you walked."

Then guilt crept in. *The idea of lying to Seongjun*—Gyu-jin thought of everything Seongjun had done for him, everything Youngdong had never done. Half a burger once—that was all. He couldn't repay Seongjun with anything, that guilt alone clawed at him constantly; if he lied it would be like a sharp slap in the face and *probably weigh down on him more than Seongjun himself.* And on top of that he felt the constant need to keep Seongjun happy. Even if he wasn't threatened anymore. It was as if his brain had started to train itself to think that way—if Seongjun was happy, things would be good.

Could he really drop Youngdong for him?

That's when the car pulled up. The driver leaned against the door, waiting.

He focused into reality and made his way to the car.

Gyu-jin lingered at the handle, turning around and forcing the words out.
"Thank you for…everything. I promise I'll make it up to you one day."

Seongjun just scoffed. Like it would conceal his actual emotions. Ones he didn't even know the names of just yet.
"Just fuck off already seriously."

He muttered under his breath.
“Before I really change my mind.”

With a small nod and a shaky, “See you tomorrow at school,” he slid into the car. Seongjun’s eyes followed until the taillights vanished into the distance.

Seongjun let out a breath, like he’d been holding it in for an eternity. His eyes were locked onto the floor; the silence spoke louder than anything else. His fingers threaded into his hair, tugging once before dropping limp.

He walked back into the kitchen. The kitchen was too empty. Too quiet. His mind flashed to when he first saw Gyu-jin there, stumbling to the island, shoving that bowl of Bibimbap towards him like a peace offering. When he found him sleeping peacefully, curled up like a kid, waiting for him like he was the highlight of his day, the memory of just the thought that if he could just hold him like that—in that moment, his day would’ve gotten better.

Then he blinked. *Nothing. No Gyu-jin. No fucking Gyu-jin. Nobody waiting for him. Nobody. Fucking nothing here. Nobody sitting with him.*

His heart was beating out his chest, and all he was met with was silence.

Something cracked in his chest, ugly and raw. Before he realized it, his hand snatched the vase from the island and hurled it across the room. The shatter echoed through the house, glass scattering like his own restraint breaking apart.

“Fuck.” His voice came low, harsh—not a yell, but close enough.

Yeah. He’d see him at school. But *fuck.* It didn’t feel like that right now. It felt like he already lost something he didn’t know he needed.

★ ☆

Back home, Gyu-jin’s mom smothered him with hugs and relief. She beamed at him, asked about his bags. He lied, said he left them on the bus. She didn’t question it, just kept hugging him.

She was so happy. Too happy. And he just felt like shit.

His mom was so happy to see him, and he couldn’t help but feel like he didn’t even want to be here.

He excused himself, claiming exhaustion, but really—he just couldn’t bear it. Couldn’t stand the contrast of her joy and his gnawing guilt.

In his room, he sat at the edge of his bed, head buried in his hands. His shoulders trembled with the uneven rhythm of his breath. The plushie sat where he’d dropped it earlier, and when

he glanced at it, his chest ached.

All he could see was Seongjun. Ripping it from a child's hands like it was nothing. Holding his hand without forcing him. Fingers in his hair instead of fists.

He grabbed it, curled into the blankets, clutching it like it was the only thing holding him together.

> *What if it all ended at school? What if things went back to the way they'd always been—fear, cruelty, distance?*

His voice cracked when he whispered into the dark.
"Fuck."

It shook like he was fighting tears.

And still, he buried himself deeper in the blankets, holding the stupid plush *like it could keep Seongjun close.*

Chapter End Notes

> datteboyo i hope you liked the toxic yaoi lmk what you think in the comments i rlly like reading them the support for this fic is really nice tysm everynyan, my twt is @yaoieugenics same user as here if youd like updates on when the new chapters are almost done

Chapter 4: Two of Us, One Wave

Chapter Summary

> The bus ride back should've been quiet. Instead, Gyu-Jin ends up caught between sharp words, unexpected truths, and the reminder that some ties refuse to let go.

Chapter Notes

> Hi guys!! Before this chapter starts I just want to say something regarding the comments because I love reading them all, I knowww a lot of you want to see gyujin stand tf up but right now his characters behavior is based off how he acted before he got the gun delivered and then got the confidence to stand up to seongjun after that. I want to keep the story or more so the dynamic as cannon as possible so Yesyes Gyu jin will stand tf up and seongjun WILL suffer for him but it'll be a progression to that turning point just as it did in the show as I try to keep most of their dynamic and characters as persistent and cannon as I can. Alsooo this chapter was inspired a lot by "the eighth sense" kdrama, it's one of my favorite kbls n seongjuns home life was also inspired by a different kdrama called "hierarchy" because the show didn't give us much insight on it but I think it fits him really well, if youve watched either youll recognize the similarity . Thank you so much for the hits and kudos and support on this fic, This chapter is like fucking long I really enjoyed writing this chapter, I hope everyone enjoys reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cafeteria buzzed with too many voices, too many shoes scraping across linoleum, bodies moving like they were chasing food that might run away from them. The noise was invasive, a constant swarm that grated against his nerves. Every laugh, every voice that wasn't his—*anyone else's presence*—pressed on him until his stomach turned. Irritation? Anger? Impatience? He didn't care to name it. Labels were for people who wanted to understand themselves. He didn't give a shit about understanding—he just wanted it gone.

I haven't seen him all fucking day.
I let him leave—so why the hell isn't he at school?
Does this fucker want to die?
It was supposed to be fine. He'd be here, like always.
Fuck—he's not here, he's—

"Seongjun! Bro, you listening?"

His eyes dragged upward, sharp and deliberate, like a blade being drawn across someone's throat—*slow*—before spilling over to the idiot snapping fingers in front of his face. The most tedious, brainless way someone could try to get attention.

The slap came quick and vicious. Minhyuk's hand snapped back so violently it nearly threw him off-balance, the sound cracking through their table louder than it should've.

"Do I look like a fucking dog to you?"

Jihoon froze. His eyes cut to Minhyuk, who stared back wide-eyed, caught in the same disbelief. Seong-Jun had never turned on them like that—not really. Sure, he'd roughed up other lackeys, shoved them around when they stepped out of line, but these two? Never them. Never with that look in his eyes.

And yet here he was, gaze cold and edged with something ugly, simmering too close to the surface.

Their silence irritated him more than the snapping fingers. His eyes rolled hard, dismissive, like their reaction wasn't worth the space it occupied. He dropped his attention back to the tray in front of him, fork hovered above his untouched food for a beat to long. His breath snagged, almost unnoticeable, before the fork clattered down into the meal with too much force, the sound sharp in the buzzing room.

He exhaled, a short, cutting sound.
"Going for a smoke."

The bench scraped back as he stood. Hands shoved deep into his pockets, shoulders loose like he didn't have the the energy to hold them tense anymore. He didn't look back. Didn't need to. Behind him, he could hear Minhyuk and Jihoon whispering in half-choked voices—

"Dude—"
"The fuck was that?"
"Shit, the fuck happened?"
"Should we, like, check on him or some shit—?"

He tilted his head just enough, glare slicing over his shoulder at that last comment. Not even full—just a sideways cut of his eye. The kind of look that pinned them in place like an order barked aloud: *Don't. Follow.*

It worked. Their voices died, eyes snapping back to their trays as if they hadn't spoken at all.

The lighter flicked alive outside, flame dancing before it touched the end of the cigarette. Smoke coiled from his lips in a heavy drag, but the wind stole most of it away before he could even taste it. His foot pressed against the wall, body loose against the brick, but his mind wouldn't fucking settle. Couldn't.

He dug a hand into his pocket, pulled out a phone that wasn't his. The black screen stared back, blank and mocking.

“How the hell did I forget to give this shit to him…”

His thumb tapped against the glass idly, the weight of it heavy in his palm, heavier than it had any right to be. If it had been in Gyujins hands, he could’ve flooded it with texts, with threats sharp enough to drag the bastard back here by fear alone. But like this—he had nothing. No leverage. No control.

His expression twitched, frustration folding into something darker as he exhaled hard through his nose.

Like he’d made up his mind on something he didn’t want to.

He pushed off the wall.

★ ☆

A bowl was set down on the table, soft but sure, landing with the faint clatter of a spoon against porcelain.

Gyu-Jin’s gaze caught on it, then flicked up to his mother. Her eyes were warm—*too warm.* The kind of warmth he’d never really believed he could get from anyone but her. Which was exactly why it made his stomach twist.

She slipped into the seat across from him, patting her vintage apron down before folding her hands on the table. Her head tilted, smile soft and knowing.

“Eat up, dear. You need to feel better so you can go back to school soon.”

Gyu-Jin inhaled through his nose, the sound catching in his throat. He sniffled, nodded once, slow, his fingers tapping the spoon against the bowl like he needed the small noise to ground him.

“Aigo… Gyu-Jin, how did you get so sick on the trip? You’ve barely said a word since you got back, baby.”

His eyes stayed glued to the soup as he ate, as if looking at her might undo him. The comfort felt too familiar—exactly what he was supposed to feel with his mom. Someone who actually cared about him. Not with him. Not with Seong-Jun.

He forced down a sigh, eyes finally dragging up to hers.

“We were outside a lot. Probably got bitten by something… Don’t worry too much, omma. You should get back to the restaurant.”

Another spoonful, mechanical, before she crossed her arms in that dramatic, old-fashioned way she had of pretending to be strict.

“Son, I’m not leaving you sick like this. It doesn’t matter how old you are—you’re still my sweet boy. The restaurant can wait.”

Gyu-Jin froze. His heart thumped too hard in his chest, but he stretched a smile across his face anyway, thin and practiced.
“Okay, okay. Thank you.”

His mother hummed some tune he didn’t recognize, her smile soft as she watched him eat.

When he finished, instinct jerked his eyes upward, shoulders tensing. He expected it—a glare, a sneer, the inevitable weight of being watched. For a second, he forgot he wasn’t sitting across from Seong-Jun. All he met was his mother’s tilted head and a soft chuckle.

“Looking better already!”

Gyu-Jin coughed into his fist, trying to swallow it down, trying to avoid further concern, but it broke through anyway. She caught it instantly.

“Ahhh… maybe not…”

She stood, collecting his bowl with careful hands, carrying it toward the kitchen before stopping, glancing back at him.

“I forgot to ask, sweetheart. That boy on the phone—he didn’t sound like Young-Dong. Have you been making new friends?”

His heart nearly skipped clean out of his chest. Or maybe it tripped over itself, crashing into panic.

He dropped his eyes, tugging at his lip.
“Well…”

How was he supposed to explain? Seong-Jun wasn’t his friend. He wasn’t more than that. He wasn’t anything he could put into words. He didn’t even know what he felt, but the silence stretched too long, leaving him cornered.

“…Yes. He’s my friend. He’s really…”
His voice trailed into nothing.

But that was enough for her. Her whole face lit up, bright with relief, and she nearly threw the bowl into the sink before rushing back to crouch beside him, her excitement spilling over.

“Oh my sweet boy, I’m so happy you’re making new friends. I was worried you’d only ever spend time with Young-Dong… Tell me, dear, is he nice? Does he treat you well?”

Gyu-Jin startled at her sudden closeness. His throat tightened. *Please just drop it.* But the words clawed their way out anyway.

“He’s… he’s nice. His name is Seong-Jun. He looked out for me a lot during the trip—he’s funny, sometimes…sometimes kind of..blunt, and his face… *he’s sort of attractive—”*

He nearly choked on the last part, snapping his eyes to her. Her brows raised, and heat shot across his face.

“No, wait—I didn’t mean it like… in a weird way—he’s just—”

Her laugh cut him off, soft and harmless.

“Don’t worry, Gyujin-ah. I’ll need to know what he looks like when I see him anyway. I’m just so glad you’re making new friends—really.”

Her eyes glistened as she stood, hidden quickly by laughter, fingers brushing at the corners.

Gyu-Jin’s chest tightened. He scrambled to stand, wrapping her in a hug before she could try to hide more of it.
“Omma, don’t cry. I’ve always been fine.”

His own voice broke, sniffled against her shoulder.

She steadied herself, pulling him back just enough to cup his shoulders.
“Go up and rest. I’ll check on you later. Promise me you’ll take care of yourself and actually rest, hm?”

He blinked, forcing another soft smile, then nodded. He slipped away, heading to his room, the weight of her words clinging to him.

In his room, he sat still too long, staring into the empty air before sighing and burying himself under the blankets.

★ ☆

Seong-Jun leaned against the rusted rails of the narrow walkway, thumb tapping idly at the phone in his hand. Gyu-Jin’s phone. His eyes stayed locked on the black screen, expression sharp with some mix of irritation and something else he didn’t want to name.

“Made me come all the way to this shit hole…”
The words slipped out under his breath, followed by a sharp exhale that burned in his chest.

He raised his fist, knocked against the door. For a second, he thought about leaving it there—dropping the damn thing and walking off. But before the thought could settle, the door swung open.

Not him.

An older woman stood there instead. His mom, obviously. *Thank fuck.*

Her head tilted as her eyes swept over him, and before he could even speak, her whole face brightened, a smile blooming too warm, too easy.

“You must be Seong-Jun! Oh dear, thank you for looking after my boy on the school trip, he said such nice things about you!”

Seong-Jun blinked once, slowly, his eyes narrowing with something close to disbelief.

Nice things about me? Fuck-gyu? Hah. The fuck?

The mocking laughter almost tore out of him, but he bit it down, letting only a twitch of his lip show before smoothing it into a smile that didn’t belong on his face. It sat there wrong, sharp around the edges.
“Yeah… that’s me.”

His gaze dragged past her, searching the space behind her shoulders like he could pull Gyu-Jin into view just by glaring hard enough. She caught it, glanced back inside, then returned her gaze to him with another oblivious smile.

“Ah, are you looking for Gyujin-ah? He fell sick shortly after he got home. I thought he would’ve told his friends.” She let out a soft chuckle. “He’s always been too concerned about others—he probably didn’t want you to worry.”

Seong-Jun’s jaw flexed. He almost rolled his eyes right there. *How could someone be this blind?* But irritation mixed with something that felt dangerously close to relief.

Sick. Just sick. Not avoiding him. Sick, obviously because of him. And he hadn’t said a word about it.

His tongue pressed hard against his cheek as he shoved the phone forward. His patience was thinning fast. The warmth dripping off every word she spoke made his skin itch.
“He left this on the bus. Give it to him. Don’t mention I was the one who dropped it off.”

He didn’t wait for her response, already turning, the tension in his shoulders begging for release before he said something he’d regret.

But her voice followed him out anyway, soft and amused:
“Ahh… Gyu-Jin wasn’t lying. That boy is actually rather attractive.”

The words hit like a stone thrown into still water. He stopped. Just for a second. Almost wished he hadn’t caught it.

Then the corner of his mouth curved, slow and sharp, into a smirk. A scoff slipped past his teeth as he shook his head and walked off.

Gyu-Jin didn’t even realize how long he’d been out. The next day came quicker than he thought—either that, or he’d just lost track, drowning in the kind of heavy sleep that clung like chains.

A soft knock at his door pulled him back.
“Gyujin-ah, I think it’s time to wake up now.”

His eyes cracked open, the haze of exhaustion still pressing against his skull. He pushed himself upright slowly, rubbing at his face as if he could scrub away the fog in his head.

“It’s almost 5 p.m., dear. You need to come out and eat something.” His mom’s voice carried through the door—gentle, careful. Like she wanted him awake but not startled, like she always spoke to him when she thought he was too fragile for the weight of the world.

Dragging a hand through his hair, he tried to shake himself awake, tried to look at least halfway presentable. He hadn’t slept that long in a while. His chest tightened with a deep inhale, and then he forced himself to swing his legs off the bed.

“I’ll be out now, thank you, omma.”

A scent close to coffee still clung faintly to his skin, steam leftover from the late shower he’d taken to steady himself. He padded down the oak stairs and slid into a chair at the dining table, fingertips tapping restlessly against the wood until his mom set a bowl down in front of him.

“Ah. Your friend dropped off your phone,” she said lightly, almost amused. “He told me not to mention who he was though—quite a strange boy.” She placed the phone in front of him like it was nothing.

Gyu-Jin froze. Swallowed—hard.

Seong-Jun.
It could only have been him.

His gaze locked on the black screen, his pulse loud in his ears.

Did he really come all this way… just to give it back?

The thought settled heavy in his chest. Relief. That was what it was, wasn’t it? A weight he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying slipped just slightly off his shoulders. His fingers twitched against the table. Maybe things wouldn’t go back to how they were. Maybe.

His mom’s eyes lingered on him, noticing how the tension in his body seemed to ease just a fraction. She didn’t press, didn’t pry. She only reached forward, warm hands cupping his cold one.

He snapped out of his spiral at the contact, his eyes darting up to meet hers. But her expression wasn’t only soft—*it was expectant, waiting.*

“I have to go to the restaurant today,” she said. “Buy some extra stock too. It’s going to be a stressful day… knowing you’re here alone. I won’t be back till late. You’ll take care of yourself, hm?”

That word lingered, thick in his chest.
Stressful.

The last thing he wanted was to add to that. To make her worry even more. She already shouldered enough. He already felt guilty for the secrets he kept locked behind his teeth, the things he couldn't bring himself to tell her.

"I'll help you out. At the restaurant." The lie came too easily, his lips curling into a practiced smile. "I'm feeling better after sleeping so long. Really—let me help. I'll go buy what you need when service slows down."

The headache pounding at his temples mocked him, splitting deeper with every word.

His mom looked at him, gaze holding just a beat too long. She knew him well enough to see through it, to see how much he carried for her. But she only smiled and nodded, pretending to believe him.

"Okay, okay, dear. Don't overdo it. I'll be sure to make your favorite when we get home."

Her hand tightened around his—not rough, not binding. Just a small, tender squeeze. Comfort he didn't feel like he deserved.

★ ☆

The day at school wasn't as hellish for Seong-Jun today. Tiring, sure, but the constant gnawing in his skull had eased. His friends noticed the shift, the way he'd settled back into something close to normal, but they didn't dare ask what had been wrong yesterday. Better not to pry. Seong-Jun was like a thin line of thread—*always ready to snap.* The glare he had thrown their way when they'd even muttered about following him yesterday had been warning enough.

Now he slumped deep into the backseat of the designated driver's car, eyes fixed on the glow of his phone as they drove. He barely paid attention until the vehicle slowed into his street. His gaze flicked up—and froze.

A black Bentley sat in the driveway.

The sight burned into his vision like a hot coal searing in the middle of an empty field. His expression twisted.

"Fucking hell. They could have at least told me they'd be back," he muttered under his breath, frustration bleeding sharp through every word.

The driver caught his pause in the rearview mirror, the way Seong-Jun lingered instead of leaving the car like usual.

Seong-Jun groaned, dragging his hand down his face with an exhausted sneer.

“Turn the car around.”

The driver didn’t ask questions. They never did. Just an obedient machine, programmed to follow orders. The car turned without hesitation.

Irritation clawed at his skull, he just needed to be somewhere far, anywhere else, somewhere where he wouldn’t run into anyone, where nobody would put a comforting hand on his shoulder, where nobody would ask questions. He didn’t care where he went, just not here, not that house, not with them, not just yet.

Eventually, the streets shifted. Rows of cramped shops, family-owned cafés, food stalls. Some area far enough out, poor enough, quiet enough that no one he knew would be around. That was enough.

“Stop here,” he ordered.

The driver pulled over. Seong-Jun stepped out, letting the sigh escape his chest like he was trying to drag the bitterness out with it.

The café was small, nearly empty at this hour. Perfect. He chose a seat outside, pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and scrolled idly through his phone, smoke curling lazily from his lips.

“Fucking assholes,” he muttered to himself. “Seriously couldn’t give me a heads-up?”

He dragged in a breath too deep, smoke burning his throat until he almost coughed. Almost. His jaw tightened.

And his mind turned elsewhere.

> *How long is that fucker gonna be sick for?*
> *Seriously, way too sensitive…*
> *Poor piece of shit probably doesn’t even have real medicine.*

His mind settled in a sudden. He dropped his hand against the table with a thud sharp enough to cut through the quiet evening air, drawing startled looks from a few customers. He didn’t notice—or didn’t care.

> *Need him back at school. Just to see the look on that friend’s of his face when he fucks him over… yeah. That’s all.*

The chair scraped against the ground as he stood. He flicked the half-burnt cigarette to the floor and ground it out beneath his shoe before heading down the sidewalk toward the convenience store.

Inside, he didn’t wander. He knew exactly what to grab, muscle memory from years of being drilled on *“precautions”* by parents who were never there when it actually mattered.

He stared down at the box of medicine in his hand. His mind cringing at the sight.
“What the hell am I even doing… seriously.”

His fingers raked through his hair, annoyance biting at him, not just at the situation but at himself. Something hot and uncomfortable churned in his chest.

And then he froze.

Out the corner of his eye—*him.*

Gyu-Jin.

Across the street. The boy was at the counter, thanking the older man behind it far too politely to be real, waving just a little as if even that was too much. A plastic bag hung in his hand as he turned to leave.

Their eyes met.

Gyu-Jin jolted like he’d been caught doing something wrong. Seong-Jun’s jaw locked tight.

“Now? Seriously… what the fuck is this kid even doing out?”

He exhaled through his nose, slow, deliberate. Pocketed the medicine with one flick of his wrist. Then he tilted his chin, a sharp, silent gesture. Come here.

Gyu-Jin froze on the spot. His chest pulled tight.

Why is he here… what the hell…

He shook his head like it might clear the haze, then forced himself to move—steps hesitant, as if dragged forward by something heavier than gravity itself.

They sat on a bench. Seong-Jun flicked his lighter and lit another cigarette, the glow briefly catching against his sharp features before fading into the dusk. They didn’t speak at first, just let the evening hum and the passing street chatter fill the silence.

Gyu-Jin sniffled, too soft, but Seong-Jun’s eyes still cut to him, head tilting with a predator’s curiosity. Gyu-Jin noticed and immediately looked down, nerves twitching at the weight of the stare.

“…Allergies,” he muttered.

Seong-Jun’s mouth twitched. He almost laughed, but it slipped out as a scoff, sharp and disbelieving.

“I know you’re sick ’cause I shoved you in the rain, dumbass.” Smoke curled out with the words, his tone dripping smug amusement. “I’m not as oblivious as your mom.”

Gyu-Jin’s eyes stayed down, his voice small, defensive.
“It’s whatever…”

The words broke off in a sneeze—tiny, high-pitched.

This time Seong-Jun did laugh. Short, mocking, but genuinely entertained.
"You sneeze like a fucking cat."

Gyu-Jin looked up at him then, lips parting with a soft scoff that barely carried any weight, before he turned his head away again.

Seong-Jun's gaze lingered. The dim streetlights painted Gyu-Jin's skin with a faint bluish glow, highlighting the flush in his nose, the sickly hue under his eyes. And then Seong-Jun's eyes landed lower—on his neck. The mark. *His mark.*

His hand shot out, fingers gripping Gyu-Jin's jaw, tilting his face to the side.
"Still there."

Heat surged to Gyu-Jin's cheeks, his entire body flustered under the sudden touch. He knew exactly what Seong-Jun meant. He yanked his face back, hiding behind his sleeve, voice muffled and trembling out softer than he meant.

"…Will fade soon? Need to get back to school…"

Seong-Jun blinked at him. A sharp puff of air left his mouth, incredulous. *Was he seriously this clueless?*

"You fucking virgin—" his voice cut sharp, cruel but not meant to carry any real bite.
"Obviously not. It'll be there for like a week."

He turned forward again, taking another drag from his cigarette, like the conversation bored him already. Gyu-Jin only sighed, head lowered, murmuring a tiny, obedient, *"okay…"*

The silence stretched—but not for long.
Seong-Jun leaned in again, closer this time, tone darker, lower, seeping under Gyu-Jin's skin.
"Don't even think about covering it up at school either way."

Gyu-Jin's breath hitched. Seong-Jun had basically announced to his whole class that Gyu-jin was some sort of "pet" to him, if anyone saw it, the only person who would dare to touch him would've been Seong-Jun.

There'd be no doubt about it that it was from him.
"What—"

A low laugh cut him off. Amused at how startled he was. Too sharp to be anything but mockery.
"Seriously—how has your mom not noticed?"

Gyu-Jin bit the inside of his cheek. *He honestly didn't know.*
"…I don't know… really… maybe she did but didn't say anything."

Seong-Jun tilted his head, studying him, dissecting him. Then he leaned in even closer, close enough for his breath to brush Gyu-Jin's ear. Gyu-Jin almost flinched at the proximity.

“Then, should I give you another one?”

Gyu-Jin’s heart tripped, beating far too fast. His eyes snapped to Seong-Jun’s—voided, steady, unblinking. His face burned hot as he tilted his head away, pushing back weakly.

“Y-you shouldn’t get this close… I could get you sick…”

Seong-Jun’s gaze held longer than it should’ve been, dragging from his cigarette. He didn’t exhale away this time. *No warning*—his hand gripped Gyu-Jin’s jaw, tight enough to part his lips, and he blew smoke straight into his mouth.

Gyu-Jin’s eyes squeezed shut, choking as the smoke burned down his throat. He tried to jerk away, but Seong-Jun held him there, struggling beneath his grip, until the haze dissipated between their lips. Only then did he release him.

Gyu-Jin clutched his throat, coughing until his eyes watered. His face burned red—not only from the sickness, not only from the smoke. His chest heaved, breath stuttering in and out.

The glare he managed was weak. Seong-Jun only smirked, leaning back lazily against the bench. Those glassy eyes of hatred, shits never getting old.
“Don’t care if you ‘get me sick,’ dumbass.”

When the coughing faded, Gyu-Jin turned sharply toward him, still flushed, frustration bleeding through his soft voice.
“…You could’ve just said that…”

Why does he always have to go this far…

Seong-Jun leaned back, shrugging one shoulder with mild indifference.
“I was joking anyways. You’re sensitive as fuck. There’s too many people—you’d make some squeaky ass noise… Other people shouldn’t get to hear you like that.”

Gyu-Jin swore his breathing stopped for a second. His whole face burned hotter than it had when the smoke hit. He refused to look at Seong-Jun.
“I don’t do that…” he muttered into his sleeve.

That little comment, Seong-Juns jaw tightened, tilted his head toward him, slow, deliberate, eyes dragging like a blade along skin.
“You don’t? Or… do you just not remember?”

His hand clamped down on Gyu-Jin’s shoulder, forcing him to face him. Gyu-Jin startled, nerves sparking sharp through his body.

“Or are you *pretending* not to remember?”

He yanked Gyu-Jin closer, voice low, dangerous.
“I can *easily* make you remember, *fuckgyu.* So don’t say fucking pointless shit.”

Then he shoved him back—hard. Enough to almost knock him off the bench if not for trained instinct catching him. Seong-Jun leaned forward pressing his elbows onto his knees, like

nothing happened. Bored. Careless.

Gyu-Jin kept his eyes down, hair shadowing his face. His hand rubbed his shoulder through his clothes, voice barely audible.
“I do remember... *obviously* I remember…”

It was so quiet it almost wasn’t meant for Seong-Jun. But he caught it. He always caught everything.

His gaze slid to the smaller boy from the corner of his eye, double-checking that he’d heard right. He hadn’t expected Gyu-Jin to admit it, to break this strange silent pact of pretending it hadn’t happened. They hadn’t spoken about that kiss—not the morning after, didn’t even get the chance the day after that. This was the first time it was acknowledged.

Seong-Jun’s lips curved into something that wasn’t quite a smile. A humorless laugh slipped out before he stood, running a hand roughly through Gyu-Jin’s hair and shoving it aside.

Something dropped into Gyu-Jin’s lap. He blinked down.
Medicine.

Seong-Jun… got me medicine?

His eyes snapped up, confusion and disbelief flooding his face. Seong-Jun only rolled his eyes.

“Why—”

“Stop fucking dying and drag your ass back to school tomorrow. Need to see you drop that friend of yours myself.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. Didn’t want to hear a thank you. Even doing this at all made his skin crawl. He’d already told himself a thousand times it was only for the fun of watching that friend squirm.

He stopped once, turning back over his shoulder.

“You’re a fucking pussy, by the way. You weren’t even out there for that long and your body’s reacting like you’ve got the damn plague… seriously.”

Then he kept walking, like he’d only commented on the weather.

Gyu-Jin didn’t answer, didn’t look at him. He knew it was just to get a reaction—and he refused to give one. He only scoffed under his breath.

It’s your fault I’m sick anyway, fucking asshole

When he finally looked back, Seong-Jun was already gone.

He sighed, long, heavy, like he’d been holding it in too long. His gaze drifted to the small box on his lap, eyes lingering as if trying to confirm it was real.

A short laugh slipped out of him.
"...He's not that bad, really."

★ ☆

Seong-Jun's hand lingered on the door handle longer than it should have, tapping a slow, restless rhythm. For a second he pictured himself staying outside, maybe stretched across the cold asphalt until morning.

He rolled his tongue against the back of his teeth, then twisted the knob.

The house was quiet—*too quiet* for the lights blazing inside. That quiet didn't last.

"There he is. Kang Seong-Jun."

His mother's voice was bright enough to cut glass. He answered it with a flat glare. She was dressed like she was heading to a gala, not standing in her own living room. His father lounged behind her at the low table in a suit that reeked of boardrooms. Their faces were blank, polished; not a single real emotion left on them.

His jaw tightened the longer he stared. He said nothing and started past.

"Where have you been? Do you even know what time it is?"

Now her tone matched the emptiness of her face. He stopped, turned just enough.

"I was busy."

The fake smile faltered. His father stood, voice sharp.

"Stop screwing around, Seong-Jun. You're a senior now, a Kang. Don't drag the family name through the dirt."

Irritation crawled over his skin. "I'm a junior. I've still got a year."

He turned towards them fully, every inch of him bristling. The sight of them in this house never sat right. Not anymore.

His mother forced out a brittle, brazen laugh. "Yes, of course. You've been looking at colleges, haven't you? The U.K… the States?"

Seong-Jun turned his head, a low scoff sliding out. "Haven't seen you for three months and that's the first thing you say? Not a 'how have you been,' not even a 'you alive?'"

Her eyes widened, then narrowed with a humorless chuckle. "That's exactly why we hire maids. To check up on you."

She glanced around. No maids. Not a sound but the ticking clock.

“Where are the maids, Seong-Jun?”

He leaned against the pillar, arms crossing lazily. “Fired them. Don’t need strangers touching my stuff.”

His father stiffened, ready to bark, but his mother spoke first, gaze sweeping the spotless room. “The place is immaculate. Did you clean it yourself?” Her eyes sharpened, a grin too thin to be real. “You’ve finally settled on a girl, haven’t you?” She dragged a manicured finger along the glass table and found it spotless. “A good one, from the look of it.”

A small uneasy feeling shot through him. Of course Gyu-Jin had cleaned—killing boredom, leaving proof. He hadn’t even noticed.

He exhaled, rolling his eyes, arms dropping. “Something like that.”

His father barked a laugh, all pride, like this was some accomplishment of his own, no warmth. “It’s in the Kang blood to choose a refined young woman early.” His father’s hand fell to his wife’s shoulder, eyes locked into each other with a faux loving gaze.

“Gross.” He muttered.

They didn’t hear it. Or pretended not to. His mother rose, snapping her bag shut with a pleased sigh that sounded like triumph.

“Let’s all have dinner when we’re back. Somewhere nice. You still need our approval, whether you like it or not.”

His gaze dragged to her, blank but edged. “Back? You’re here for what—half a day? And then you disappear again?” He scoffed, almost under his breath. “Don’t bother coming back at all.”

He turned for the stairs. His father shouted after him, his mother told him to watch his tone. He didn’t slow. The bedroom door slammed like a gunshot.

*“We came back because this is **our home,** Seong-Jun!”* his father’s voice chased up the stairwell.

He leaned against the door, staring at the ceiling. “Some home,” he muttered.

The thought that followed stayed silent. *The last time this place had felt like anything close to home was when he had that pathetic mutt in his bed.*

He let out a long breath and dropped onto the mattress. Phone in hand, thumb scrolling slow, trying to drown the static in his head.

“Fucking assholes ruined my night.”

The side of his phone tapped against his knuckle. “Shouldn’t care. They’ll be gone tomorrow anyway.”

The next thought slid in, quieter but heavier.

Yeah. And the kid’ll be at school tomorrow too.

★ ☆

The classroom hummed with the soft static of early morning—fluorescent buzz, distant footsteps, the warm spill of sunlight across empty desks. Gyu-Jin had made sure to arrive before anyone else. Silence felt safer when it came first.

He sat across from Young-Dong in the hollow quiet. Seong-Jun had lingered only a few minutes before his phone buzzed; a quick glance, a muttered “Minhyuk, motherfucker…” under his breath, and a sharp order tossed over his shoulder: *Hurry up*. Then he was gone, leaving the air heavier than before.

Young-Dong leaned forward, voice pitched low but edged. “Dude, seriously… what’s going on? You ignore my texts for days, then you text me to meet up early, and you walk in with that bastard—” He stopped like the memory itself burned. “And what the hell was that at the mall?”

Gyu-Jin dragged a hand through his hair, fingers digging like he could claw out the nerves rattling his skull. He couldn’t tell him. Young-Dong hated Seong-Jun—they both did. If Gyu-Jin suddenly stopped hating him—*if he even looked like he’d stopped*—Young-Dong would never understand. Hell, Gyu-Jin didn’t understand it himself.

“It’s a lot,” he said finally, voice thin. “I want to tell you, I do… I just can’t. Not right now. I need to figure it out first.”

Young-Dong’s eyes narrowed, studying the constant flick of Gyu-Jin’s gaze toward the windows, like he expected a shadow to materialize. That’s when he noticed it—the faint mark at the side of Gyu-Jin’s neck.

“Dude. What the *hell* is that?”

Their eyes met across the desk. Gyu-Jin froze, pulse hammering, and yanked his collar higher, a cough scraping out of him.

“Mosquito bite.”

Young-Dong blinked, lips parting with a quiet scoff of disbelief. “Gyujin… the hand holding, and now this—*holy shit,* this is going way too far. If he’s forcing you—”

“He didn’t force me to do anything.” The words came out sharper than he meant, cutting through the room. “There’s nothing going on. Seriously. Drop it.”

Silence fell, heavy and awkward. Young-Dong stared, wide-eyed. Gyu-Jin opened his mouth to soften it, to apologize—but his phone buzzed first.

A single text.

[crazy bastard]
Come here. Sport storage room.

The screen seemed to glow hotter in his hand. Young-Dong couldn’t see the message, but he caught the way Gyu-Jin went rigid.

Gyu-Jin stood too fast, shoving the phone into his pocket. “I have to go. Young-Dong—I’m sorry. I’ll talk to you later.”

A startled scoff followed him. “It’s Seong-Jun, isn’t it? If you need help—I know the teachers don’t do shit, but we can—”

“I’m fine, Young-Dong.” Gyu-Jin turned halfway, words clipped but quiet. “You’re my best friend. If I was in real trouble, you’d know. I don’t need help… really.”

He forced a small, tight smile, then pivoted before his friend could answer. He didn’t want to hear whatever came next. Couldn’t.

★ ☆

Gyu-jin’s nerves clawed at him the whole walk to the sports storage room—for once, not because Seong-Jun had texted, but because he knew he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t cut Young-dong loose. Couldn’t lie to Seong-Jun either. That look on Young-dong’s face when he’d snapped at him, even by accident, kept replaying like a bruise in his chest.

Why did it have to be a choice between his best friend and Seong-Jun’s approval? Why did it feel like a trap he’d walked into himself?

He stopped short in front of the storage room.

A senior slumped against the locker, one eye swollen shut, fresh bruises scattered down to the hem of his shirt, nose streaked with drying blood.

Gyu-jin’s breath hitched. His gaze darted to Seong-Jun.

The older boy lounged against the wall outside the room, hands buried in his pockets. His face was unreadable, but when he noticed what Gyu-jin was staring at, he turned his head, a

slow drift of eyes toward the beaten kid inside. Then he looked back, one brow lifting—lazy, deliberate.

“What?”

“Who is—”

Metal shrieked as the door banged closed. Min-hyuk stumbled out, grin stretched wide, eyes bright like a wolf fresh off the hunt.

“Ahh, seriously. These senior bastards won’t try shit again.” His laugh was sharp and animal, clasping Seong-Jun’s shoulder.

Seong-Jun’s lip curled. He swatted Min-hyuk’s hand off his shoulder as if it burned.

“Would’ve been you if I hadn’t saved your ass, motherfucker.”

Min-hyuk just scoffed, laughter rough and careless, leaning back against the opposite wall, the metal door now a crooked barrier between them and the groaning senior inside.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll beat your ass someday.”

Seong-Jun arched a brow, no smile. Before he could answer, Min-hyuk finally noticed Gyu-jin.

“Yah. What’s *fuck-gyu* doing here?”

Gyu-jin flinched, startled because he didn’t even realize he was staring. It was strange—seeing Seong-Jun like this, almost… friendly. The way Min-hyuk’s jab slid right off him, no sparks of anger, no violence. A flicker of something twisted through Gyu-jin—jealousy, maybe, not of Min-hyuk exactly, but of how easy it seemed for someone else to exist around Seong-Jun without being hurt.

Seong-Jun pushed off the wall, hands still pocketed, voice flat and cutting. “Mind your own business.” He closed the distance between them, gaze locked on Gyu-jin.

Gyu-jin’s chest tightened.

“Did you do it?” Seong-Jun’s tone was low, off-puttingly calm, like the bleeding senior was background noise.

Gyu-jin stepped back a half pace. “…I was going to—but you texted me, so I didn’t have time…”

Seong-Jun tilted his head, nodding once, slow, like confirming how useless that answer was. Then he crouched slightly, just enough to catch the eyes Gyu-jin kept trying to drop.

“I left you there for fifteen minutes. How hard is it to say, ‘Not gonna be your friend anymore, fatass. Fuck off’?”

Gyu-jin's breath stumbled. *Did Seong-Jun really think this would be easy for him?*

"He's my best friend…" His voice cracked, thin and trembling under the pressure.

A smirk ghosted across Seong-Jun's mouth—not amused, something darker.

He straightened, and Gyu-jin instinctively leaned back, bracing for the hit—a shove, a fist, anything.

Instead, Seong-Jun ruffled his hair, fingers rough and mocking.

"Knew you couldn't do it, fuck-gyu."

Gyu-jin stiffened, lifting his gaze despite himself, caught in that sharp, unblinking stare.

"Leave. Now. Before you end up like that senior back there."

The command snapped through him like a key turning in a lock. He nodded, quick and shaky, and slipped past, like a cage door had swung open behind him.

When Gyu-jin disappeared down the hall, Min-hyuk barked out a laugh, sauntering closer.

"Soo… the fuck was that?"

"Useless bastard," Seong-Jun muttered, barely audible. "Guess I'll have to do it myself."

"Huh?"

Seong-Jun finally turned, eyes flat as stone.
"Find that fucker Young-dong. Bring him to the bathroom during lunch."

★ ☆

When lunch finally hit, Seong-Jun was perched on the bathroom countertop above the sinks, blazer draped loose, the picture of someone who owned the place.

His lackeys pinned Young-dong between them, the scuffle echoing off the tiled walls. The kid thrashed and spat pleas while they laughed like it was all a joke.

"Aish—this fucker won't stop moving."

"Let's just beat him up, yeah?"

Seong-Jun slid off the marble, landing easy. Hands slipped into his blazer pockets as he tilted his head, eyes cutting through the space like Young-dong was the intruder here—like this wasn't a trap he'd set himself.

“Yah. You wanna survive this shithole, right?”

Young-dong nodded too fast, panic jittering through his shoulders while the others held him still.

A smirk that didn’t reach his eyes crawled upon Seong-Jun’s face, slightly raising his brows.

“So, Young-dong. Wanna try being a bully?”

★ ☆

By the time the last class of the day dragged around, Gyu-jin still hadn’t seen either of them. He should’ve been relieved—no Seong-Jun to corner him, no Young-dong demanding explanations.

But the relief never came.

Because Seong-Jun hadn’t touched him.
And that only meant someone else had taken the hit.

The image of that battered senior from earlier crept back, souring his stomach. Maybe that whole display had been a warning—t*his is what happens when you waste my time.* If Seong-Jun wanted to make a point, Young-dong would be the perfect message.

The silent mantra thudded with every heartbeat. *Hoping Young-dong wasn’t bleeding somewhere because of him.*

He’d promised Young-dong he’d talk later, but lunch passed with no sign of him. No sign of Seong-Jun either—he wasn’t even in class right now.

Gyu-jin’s pen tapped a frantic rhythm against his desk, the teacher’s voice fading to static. Every creak of the hallway made his chest tighten.

The door slammed open.

“Young-dong…?” His head snapped up so fast his neck ached.

Young-dong strode down the aisle, ignoring the startled stares that followed him like ripples.

“*Fuck,* I thought you were—”

The fist came first. A crack of knuckles against skin. Pain burst white across Gyu-jin’s face and he toppled sideways out of his chair, words dying in his throat. Desks screeched against the floor as the class recoiled.

Blinking through the sting, he looked up—into eyes he barely recognized. No warmth. No teasing edge. To Gyu-jin, he looked *hurt,* as if he was threaded with anger he thought he'd never have.

Gyu-jin backed into the lockers, breath shaking.

"Don't talk to me again—we're not friends anymore… *fuck-gyu.*"
Young-dong's voice broke on the name, and it hit harder than the punch.

"...shit..." The whisper scraped out of Gyu-jin before he could swallow it.

The teacher's palm slammed onto his desk, the crack ricocheting through the room. "Yah! Seo Young-dong! What in the world are you doing?!"

Gyu-jin's pulse thundered, panic and guilt twisting tight until it hurt to breathe.

★ ☆

Gyu-jin stepped out of the school building, shoulders slumped, fingers locked tight around the straps of his bag. His sneakers scuffed the pavement in slow, dragging steps, eyes fixed on the ground.

"Seong-jun must've told him what happened. I guess he would've found out eventually but —" he kicked a pebble hard, "—fuck, I didn't think he'd be *that* pissed…"

Even with the dull ache blooming across his cheek, some twisted part of him felt relieved. Seong-jun hadn't touched him after the mess with Young-dong. Just words. They'll reconcile. He could still explain—*would explain*—when he finally sorted his own head out.

"Yah! Park Gyu-jin!"
He flinched, spinning around. Woo-jae strode across the courtyard, waving a sheet of paper like it was a summons.

"Fucking hell…" Gyu-jin muttered under his breath, bracing for some unwanted pep talk.

But Woo-jae wasn't here to console anyone. He stopped beside him, face blank as a spreadsheet, and thrust the paper forward.

Gyu-jin took it automatically. A form.

"Mr. Kwon asked me to give this to you," Woo-jae said, voice clipped, almost mechanical. "You were absent about two weeks, if I recall correctly. If you fill it out by tomorrow morning you can still participate."

He tugged a folded handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his fingers like the paper might have left a residue.

“He said if you don’t want to fall behind after being gone so long, you should come. Extra credit. Three days, two nights. Not too much effort…” His gaze slid up and down Gyu-jin, flat and assessing. “…for someone like you.”

Gyu-jin narrowed his eyes, a scoff caught in his throat. *Someone like me? What’s that even supposed to mean?*

He skimmed the form: a school trip to some coastal research center. An actual one this time—except he’d already used *a fake school trip* as his cover when he disappeared. His Mom had worried herself sick over that lie. No way she’d sign off on another.

But *extra credit* glared from the page. College. A job good enough to keep his mom safe. He clenched his jaw, then exhaled slowly. Maybe he could spin it—say he needed to make up for missed work after the time Seong-jun ruined their project and he’d lied about being sick to stay home. Plus the two previous days he’d been absent. Maybe she’d believe him.

Woo-jae tapped his foot, each click a metronome of impatience. He never meddled in things that didn’t benefit him. Everyone knew Seong-jun had it out for Gyu-jin, but Woo-jae wasn’t the type to offer pity.

Still, his eyes flicked to the faint bruise forming along Gyu-jin’s cheek, for once wasn’t inflicted by Seong-Jun, but by his only friend. That thin needle of pity threading through his pride.

“Your buddy’s quite the diplomat.”

Gyu-jin blinked, caught off guard. “I guess so. I… messed up, though. Kinda deserved it.”

Woo-jae arched a brow and adjusted his glasses with a precise push.

“And? What could you have possibly done to make him jeopardize his ability to attend school?”

Gyu-jin hesitated. Woo-jae wasn’t a friend, barely more than a classmate from a group project. But maybe that made him safer. No pity, no half-assed advice.

“He saw me at a mall with Seong-jun,” he admitted.

Woo-jae’s lips parted. He tilted his head, the disbelief almost clinical.

“A mall? With Seong-jun?” A small shake of his head. “What the hell were you doing in a mall with Kang Seong-jun?”

“Getting new clothes,” Gyu-jin said, trying to ignore the shock. “He bought me this stupid plushie too—grabbed it from a kid. It was… kinda funny.”

Woo-jae narrowed his eyes like he could cut through the absurdity.

“New clothes? *A stuffed animal?*—Are you sure we’re referring to the same Seong-jun? The one who treats the hallway like a boxing ring?”

Gyu-jin lifted one shoulder. “He’s not that bad when he’s not upset, I guess.”

A thin icy scoff slid out of Woo-jae. “I knew you weren’t a genius, Gyu-jin, but this is almost *below* elementary-grade.”

Gyu-jin rolled his eyes. Brutal honesty was at least better than fake concern.

“Yeah, whatever. But the point is, when Young-dong saw us we were… walking really close—this time it wasn’t forced. I couldn’t explain it, kinda snapped at him, and I think Seong-jun told him. So, I guess that’s why he’s pissed.”

“Walking really close…” Woo-jae’s voice sharpened, slightly more enthusiastic. “That’s one way to phrase physical contact, I suppose.”

He gave a scalpel-thin chuckle, cold and precise, as if he’d just proven a theorem.

“You can’t be serious—Gyu-jin, do you have a thing for getting hit?”

Gyu-jin’s eyes narrowed, a scoff catching despite the jab landing deeper than he wanted to admit.

“No, I don’t.” His gaze dropped, voice softening. “I hate it. Really. I wish he could just act normal.”

Woo-jae didn’t blink. Didn’t notice the drop, or just actually couldn’t ‘read the room’.

“So you want him to change?” A small shake of his head, cocking a brow. “Don’t tell me you actually have *feelings* for that psycho.”

The form slipped from Gyu-jin’s fingers. *Feelings?* No. Seong-jun was violent, arrogant, deliberately mean. Even when he was ‘kind’ it felt like walking a tightrope. There was no way... *right?*

“I don’t like him like that,” he started. “Everyone wants him to change. Even the teachers, probably. Doesn’t mean I like him.”

Woo-jae spoke as Gyu-jin crouched to grab the fallen form. “Well, I don’t. I don’t care either way. He doesn’t bother me, so it’s irrelevant. Pretty sure most students he leaves alone feel the same or they’d all file reports.”

Gyu-jin slid the paper under his fingers with a quiet sigh. *“*Yeah. *Of course* that’s how you think…”

His eyes lifted, the courtyard light catching the edge of Woo-jae’s glasses, and for a moment the world held its breath.

The whole time Gyu-jin and Woo-jae were talking, Seong-jun and his two shadows were running their own commentary—same topic, different venom.

“So, Fuck-gyu shows up and suddenly you’re acting normal again. What, you two have a marriage spat or some shit?”

Min-hyuk’s grin curled like a hook before Seong-jun gave him a shove, rolling a shoulder afterward with lazy indifference, as though brushing off the moment itself.

“Think whatever, man. Don’t care either way.”

Min-hyuk clutched at his chest in mock offense. “Yeah, sure. Keep secrets from your *best friends.*”

Seong-jun’s eyes thinned, a low, derisive sound sliding out of his throat. “I could care less if you got shot in the head right now, idiot. Might show up for Ji-hoon’s funeral, though.”

Ji-hoon snorted, trading a grin with Min-hyuk.

“Yah—!” Min-hyuk barked, half-offended.

Ji-hoon tipped his chin at Seong-jun. “Fine, don’t tell us why you were pissed Monday. But the kids back at school and you still haven’t said what the hell was wrong with *that* guy.”

Seong-jun glanced to Ji-hoon. “Taemin? Yeah, that freak escaped a mental ward. Like, actually fucked in the head.”

Min-hyuk lit up like he’d been waiting for confirmation. “Knew it, dude! No one sane acts like that.”

Ji-hoon breathed out a humorless laugh. “Yeah. What the hell would someone like that even want with Fuck-gyu?”

“Tch. Long story.” Seong-jun’s voice sharpened. “Everything was going somewhat on track after that, until that idiot he hangs around with froze up at him in the mall like some clueless bitch.”

Min-hyuk choked on air before breaking into a cackle, shoulders shaking.
“You were at *a mall* with *Fuck-gyu?”* Immature chuckles slipped out, like this was the funniest thing he’d heard. “What is he, your girlfriend?”

Seong-jun only clicked his tongue, dismissing his iridescent friend with a glance.
“We were getting him clothes so he could leave, dumbass.” A shrug, deliberate. “He pissed me off anyway. Beat the shit out of him when we got back.”

Min-hyuk barked another laugh. “Yeah, that more sounds like you.”

Ji-hoon’s low chuckle followed. “Starting to think all this scheming had you actually liking that loser for a second.”

Seong-jun scoffed, the sound edged with something harder—something almost uneasy.
“He’s still pathetic when I need something done. Couldn’t even drop his friend when I told him to. Shits getting annoying.”

Min-hyuk started tapping Seong-jun's shoulder, once, twice—too many times.
"Yah, yah—wait. Isn't that Fuck-gyu down there? Who's the nerd?"

"Not *that* guy again…" Ji-hoon groaned, tilting his head. The sour memory of their project together was written all over his face.

Seong-jun's eyes locked on the pair across the wide walkway: *Gyu-jin and Woo-jae.*

The sight made him still—not because Gyu-jin was with someone else, but because he looked almost… normal. Not stammering, not shrinking. Talking comfortably. Like Woo-jae made it easy.

Ji-hoon spoke, not to ease the silence, but to rather ease the irritation sharpening his skull at the sheer sight of Woo-jae.
"That Woo-jae kid—he's a problem, right? All buddy-buddy with Gyu-jin. Another Young-dong. Let's just wreck him now. Piece of shit seriously deserves it more than that fatass…"

His mutter faded, sour and tired.

Seong-jun didn't answer. His eyes stayed locked on Gyu-jin, until a slip of paper fell and the boy turned around and crouched to pick it up.

When Gyu-jin looked up, their gazes collided.

Seong-jun's stare was a blade—unblinking, cold enough to pin him to the pavement.

Gyu-jin froze. His hand tightened around the paper.

Then—panic. He broke the stare, fast. Turned, muttered something that had to be a goodbye, and bolted, every movement jittery like instinct had taken over.

Seong-jun blinked once. A low, sharp chuckle slid from his throat as he shoved his hands into his pockets, eyes still on the empty space where Gyu-jin had stood.

"Yeah," he said, voice thin and cutting. "Doubt he'll act up."

The next day, long buses crowded the school entrance, engines coughing white into the morning air. Students spilled across the sidewalk in their own clothes instead of uniforms, voices rising over the thin wind. Excitement crackled—anything was better than another day locked in a classroom. Bags thudded into compartments, shoulders bumped in the slow shuffle toward the folding doors.

Gyu-jin had convinced his mom with half-truths and a careful smile. Extra credit needed from the times he'd stayed home. College prep. The need to stay ahead. Not lies—just not the whole story. She'd hesitated after he came home sick from the last "*school trip,"* dish towel

twisting in her hands, but let him go. She always did. She wanted him to have the life she couldn't give, and she'd never be the reason he fell behind.

He stepped forward when the line lurched. Permission slip, quick nod, and a glance to the side without meaning to.

Young-dong stood in a separate row for a different bus. Their eyes locked, a beat too long—*like a taut wire pulled between them.* Childhood friends staring across a widening gap, each holding their own private hurt.

Young-dong looked away first, eyes flicking down, sighing without a sound.

Gyu-jin's sigh followed, breath leaving him like a quiet echo. He tucked a strand of hair behind his ear and climbed onto his bus.

Inside, the bus was packed and warm with chatter. He scanned the rows—friends shoulder to shoulder, laughter pressed into the air—and felt a sudden, guilty relief when he didn't find the one face he'd been half-expecting.

Seong-jun wasn't there.

Not that Gyu-jin was avoiding him. Just… not now.

The only free spot sat mid-row, beside Woojae. Of course. The kid was hunched by the window, scribbling in a notepad, and the empty seat next to him was marked with two pens laid in a perfect X like a ward against intrusion.

"Really…" Gyu-jin muttered.

He tapped the seat. Woojae didn't look up, only slid his gaze sideways past the frame of his glasses. A quick, clinical scan of the bus: no empty seats. His eyes landed back on Gyu-jin, expression flat as a spreadsheet, then returned to his page. For a heartbeat it seemed he'd ignore him. Then, without breaking rhythm, Woojae reached out and lifted the pens—no glance, no fumble—just a quiet, mechanical motion, precise as if the world always bent the way he predicted.

Gyu-jin dropped into the seat, drained. Woojae didn't greet him. Expected. The guy moved through life like a machine built for grades and deadlines; small talk wasn't part of the programming.

The doors clanged shut. Engine rumbled. The bus rolled forward. Gyu-jin didn't bother starting a conversation either, shoving in his earphones and firing up a mobile shooter game. Pixels and gunfire filled his head until his team lost and he cursed under his breath.

"Do you mind?" Woojae's voice came out flat, edged, his pen slowing but not stopping.

Gyu-jin looked over. He didn't dislike the guy, but the bluntness had a way of peeling at anyone's nerves.

“Why are you even on this trip? Your grades have to be good enough without the extra credit. And it’s not like you’d… enjoy this.”

Woojae’s pen paused, then continued its neat scrawl. “My grades are not merely *‘good enough.’* They’re close to perfect. I’m not passing up an effortless way to stay ahead.”

Gyu-jin only managed a single inhale, about to respond, but Woojae cut him off—still calm, still surgical. “Refrain from speaking to me. I’m clearly busy.”

He tapped his pen against the notepad for emphasis. Gyu-jin’s eyes dropped to the page.

“Directions in case returning driver loses his mind, goes off route, and tries to drive us off a cliff:
0–15 mins: straight down highway
15 mins: turn left
15–27 mins: straight road
27 mins: third exit around traffic circle
27–35 mins: straight road
35 mins: turn right at intersection
35–57 mins: straight down highway (mild traffic hold-up)”

…and it kept going, another meticulous half-hour of notes.

Gyu-jin squinted, wondering if he was hallucinating, then lifted his gaze back to Woojae.

Is this guy even human?

A short laugh escaped him before he could catch it as he turned away. Woojae’s side-eye flicked over, sharp and silent, then he went right back to writing.

The rest of the ride settled into a strange rhythm—Gyu-jin blasting opponents on his screen, Woojae charting every turn like a man who trusted no one but himself.

★ ☆

The bus finally lurched to a stop after nearly two hours of highway hum. Brakes hissed, doors yawned open, and a wave of students spilled out like a shaken soda can. They clustered in messy knots outside the coastal research center, voices bouncing in the salt-heavy air.

Mr. Kwon stood off to the side, deep in conversation with a man who looked like he’d just wandered off a beach boardwalk. The guy wore a loud Hawaiian tank top and knee-length shorts, skin baked golden, hair sun-bleached to a lazy brown brushing his shoulders.

A sharp whistle split the chatter. Heads snapped toward him before the echo even died.

He raised a megaphone and grinned wide.

“Alright, alright, young newcomers! Now that you’ve settled down, let’s start the briefing!” His voice boomed, too bright against the gray sea backdrop. “Welcome to our beloved sanctuary. I’m Choi Dong-Ha, your field guide for the next few days! We’re excited to have you here. You’ll be with us for three days. Dorms have two beds, and your bunkmate is whoever you sat next to on the ride here. Let’s all have a good time, yes?!”

The crowd answered with a ripple of half-hearted murmurs, sneakers scuffing against the pavement.

Dong-Ha leaned forward on his heels and whistled, the sound snapping like a firecracker.

“Come on, more energy! Let’s have a good time, yes?!”

“Yes, sir!” the students shouted back, voices forced into shaky unison.

“There we go!” He threw a fist in the air, the grin catching the sun’s glare. “Let’s have fun—fighting!”

The rest of the briefing blurred into a practiced spiel: how the aquarium rotated its rescued sea life, keeping them only long enough to heal before release; how much the staff valued every creature’s freedom; where students could roam during free time; the strict 10 p.m. curfew; where the tuck shop was if they needed snacks. He wrapped it all with a sharp nod.

“Rest up for today. Guides and presentations start tomorrow at 9 a.m. sharp. Show up later than fifteen minutes and you’re out.”

The words hung over the group like the tang of saltwater—rules and warnings threaded through the easy beach-town cheer, the kind of mix that kept everyone just a little on edge.

★ ☆

Students poured through the entrance in a rush of sneakers and voices.
Gyu-jin would be lying if he said it wasn’t breathtaking. The entire corridor curved upward like a glass tunnel, the ceiling a seamless arc of blue water. Schools of silver fish drifted overhead in lazy spirals, their scales catching the light like shards of a moving sky. For a heartbeat he forgot the field trip was just for the extra credit, forgot the chatter and elbows. It felt like walking through the inside of the ocean.

Phones flashed. A few kids tapped at the glass to taunt the fish. Woo-jae had barely glanced up, already muttering something about *“vaccinating the dorm”* before peeling off into the crowd.

Gyu-jin stayed, palms pressed to the railing, watching stingrays glide above. *But his eyes weren’t only on the water.*

He hadn't seen Seong-Jun. Not on the bus. Forgot to even scan the mob outside when the guide gave his speech.
The absence scraped his mind. Relief should have come with it—no sudden shove at his shoulder, no hand in his hair—but not knowing was worse.

He really doubted Seong-Jun would have chosen being at school over coming on the field trip.
If Seong-Jun was here, he could be anywhere, his next step could easily be a land mine.

Where the hell was he?

Gyu-jin slid to lean against the cool curve of glass, careful to not apply too much pressure to the glass, letting the tide of students stream past. Invisible, as always. He thumbed open his phone before he'd even thought about it, Messenger lighting the screen, opening Seong-Juns chat.

What the hell could he even say?
Hey, did you come to the field trip? My brain's going to explode if I don't know.
Yeah, obviously he couldn't say that.

His thumbs hovered, ghosting over letters he wouldn't send. He's never even texted Seong-Jun first, wasn't something he'd ever thought of willingly doing.

The phone buzzed.

[crazy bastard]
Look up.

His head snapped up. A startled sound escaped before he could choke it back.

"You read that fast" Seongjun towered over him, arching a brow with a small grin "you were about to text me? thinking about where I was?"

Gyu-jin flinched to his feet, heart stumbling.

"…i was just going to ask if you came…"

The words came thin, his breath shaky, eyes already begging to cut contact.

Seong-Jun tilted his head, slow, deliberate. His fingers slid into Gyu-jin's hair, gentle enough at first to almost feel kind.

"Gyu-jin," he murmured, voice coated in mock sweetness, "you didn't really think I'd let you be here alone, let you do whatever you want, *with* whoever you want, did you?"

The grip turned brutal in an instant. He yanked Gyu-jin's head up, forcing their eyes to lock. Pain lanced through him in a blink.

"You know I'd break every bone in your weak little body before I let you do that, right?"

Gyu-jin's pulse thundered. "I wouldn't do anything… even if you weren't here…"

Seong-Jun's gaze dragged over him, slow and unreadable. Then he released the fistful of hair.

"Really now? *That doesn't sound very convincing."*

"…What—how else am I supposed to—"

Seong-Jun crouched until their faces were level, his eyes a sharp, amused dark. "If you wanted to be more convincing…" His voice dropped, a velvet edge of danger, his head tipping sideways in mock pity. "Shouldn't you say: *I won't let anyone else touch me except Seong-Jun?"*

Gyu-jin froze. *Why the hell would I say that*

Seong-Jun's jaw twitched. He stepped down—hard—on Gyu-jin's foot, grinding until a choked sob broke out. Panic clawed at Gyu-jin's throat.

"…I won't let anyone else touch me… except you, Seong-Jun—only you…"

Seong-Jun paused. "Only me?"
The pressure lifted. Gyu-jin swayed, jaw trembling despite his effort to steady it.

Seong-Jun noticed. How the smaller boy trembled even if he didn't want to. His thoughts twisted.

If they weren't surrounded by a fuck-ton of people he'd shove that trembling jaw down his dick right now.

He only raked a hand through his own hair, scraping the thought, exhaling "Yeah… better."

Gyu-jin's breath came in ragged as Seong-Jun straightened, the space between them still burning.

"I'll let you do what you want today," Seong-Jun said at last, voice low enough for only him.

"Keep your location on. If I text and you don't answer in a minute, I'll find you." His eyes swept the hallway, as if he was looking for something. "You sat next to Woo-jae on the bus, so he's with you the whole time. Let him get too close and I'll smash his glasses into his fucking eye."

Gyu-jin's breath hitched. "You weren't even on our bus… how did you—"

Seongjun laughed, cutting him off, just a short, singular laugh, like the answer was so obvious.

"Gyu-jin, you couldn't hide even if you wanted to."

A shout carried down the hall, Seong-Juns eyes slid from Gyujin—Min-hyuk waving with Ji-hoon at his side, arms full of snacks.

Seong-Jun flicked one last look back, a smirk that felt like a promise. “Yeah, yeah, shut up, I’m coming,” he muttered to his friends, rolling a shoulder as he strolled away.

Gyu-jin’s gaze followed until the taller boy disappeared into the crowd. Only then did he lower his eyes to the polished floor, fists tightening around the straps of his bag before he forced himself toward the dorms.

★ ☆

Even though Gyu-jin technically had the rest of the day to himself, it never felt like Seong-jun had actually left.

It started with just a few questions an hour after Seong-jun disappeared with Ji-hoon and Min-hyuk.

[crazy bastard]
What’s ur dorm number

[me]
its 38, close to the courtyard

[crazy bastard]
Have u showered yet?

[me]
Yeah a bit ago

[crazy bastard]
Then what u wearing rn

[me]
Just like a hoodie over a plain shirt n jeans

But as the day went on, the pings kept coming, closer and closer together until every buzz felt like a pulse against his ribs.

Where are u
Who are u with
Who’s around u
Who are u talking to

Even when dinner came, Seong-jun’s texts were practically breathing down his neck.

Eyes down whenever Gyu-jin glanced up from his tray. ***Don’t answer*** the second someone tried to start a conversation.

He shoved the phone deep into his hoodie, hoping the fabric would mute it. It still vibrated against his body like a heartbeat he couldn't escape.

[crazy bastard]
Look to ur right

Gyu-jin's fingers tightened around his phone, his head snapped sideways. Nobody.

Another buzz.

[crazy bastard]
lmfao ur retarded

He narrowed his eyes, scoffing under his breath. "Is he twelve? Seriously…"

By eight o'clock he'd drifted to a quiet deck that overlooked the beach—just far enough from the courtyard crowd to pretend he was alone. His dorm, unfortunately, sat right next to all the noise.

Salt wind cut across his face. The ocean glimmered dark and endless, waves catching the last streaks of navy light. The messages slowed but never really stopped.

"Does he seriously not have anything better to do?" he muttered, voice thin from a day of buzzing nerves.

He leaned into the railing, elbows pressed to the cold metal, phone still in hand because what was the point of putting it away? Hair whipped around his face. For a second the view almost let him breathe.

Almost.

A voice closed in behind him.

"Seriously—Amiodarone, *Amiodarone* the white box I *purposefully* left on your nightstand—that's the one you take at night, not the—"

"Yes, Mother, I brought my inhaler…"

"For goodness' sake—yes, obviously I packed extra glasses."

"What? No, I'm not making friends. It's a repulsive beach, not a—"

Woo-jae's words cut off when he noticed Gyu-jin standing there, watching.

"Goodnight, Mother. Don't call again."
He hung up.

Gyu-jin snorted. Woo-jae shot him a glare and brushed down his shirt like he could iron the embarrassment out of it.

“I guess you might actually be human after all,” Gyu-jin said, small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Woo-jae’s glare sharpened. “I don’t recall claiming I wasn’t. Your assumption was based on the fact that I don’t act like a brainless Neanderthal.”

Gyu-jin chuckled, turning back to the horizon, arms folding over the railing. Woo-jae dropped onto the bench with a heavy exhale.

Almost quiet. Except for the soft tap of Woo-jae’s foot against the wooden boards and the rasp of paper as he scribbled, tore a sheet free, and started again. Over and over.

Gyu-jin glanced back. For once Woo-jae didn’t look untouchable—his movements weren’t sharp, almost nervous.

Probably the call with his mom, Gyu-jin figured. He understood that kind of worry.

He tossed a wrapped candy across the space. It landed in Woo-jae’s lap. Woo-jae eyed it like an alien artifact, then lifted a single eyebrow at Gyu-jin.

“The waves look nice right now,” Gyu-jin said, tone casual. Just a suggestion. He turned back to the water.

“It’s salt and water. I’d rather not.” Woo-jae kept writing—then froze, shoulders tight. The page ripped free, crumpled in his fist.

“It might help calm your nerves,” Gyu-jin added, voice softer. “…but it’s up to you really”

Woo-jae’s fingers tightened around his pen. A muttered curse, then he stood abruptly. “Fine.”

They stood side by side at the railing. Gyu-jin leaned into it, letting the ocean fill the silence. Woo-jae stayed stiff-armed, refusing to touch the rail.

Just five minutes passed with only the crash of waves.

“This is seriously supposed to ‘calm my nerves’?” Woo-jae finally snapped, foot stomping once.

“It won’t if you stand there like you’re in a board—”

Gyu-jin’s phone buzzed.

He didn’t flinch, just tensed, words dying on his tongue.

[crazy bastard]
You’re not in ur dorm yet

[me]
Yea I’m on the deck, there’s a lot of people near my dorm bc it’s close to the courtyard

His grip on the phone tightened.

[me]
Is that okay? Should I go back?

Woo-jae tilted his head, catching the change in Gyu-jin's posture. A short huff of air passed through his nose as he turned back to the sea.
"Seems I'm not the only one with irritable nerves."

Gyu-jin exhaled, forcing his shoulders to loosen, arms sliding along the railing.

"He's been texting me nonstop all day…"

"Admirable. Your boyfriend's worried about you."

Gyu-jin half laughed, half scoffed. "Shut up, Woo-jae."

The phone buzzed again.

"Seriously…" Gyu-jin muttered.

[crazy bastard]
Ur alone there?

[me]
Woo-jae is here too

[crazy bastard]
Go back to ur dorm rn

A groan escaped him. He dragged a hand down his face before typing a reply.
"fucking hell…"

Woo-jae's dry laugh cut the air. "I'd recommend marriage counseling. Divorce doesn't sound plausible right now."

"Like therapy would fix him," Gyu-jin said with a shrug, sliding the phone into his pocket. "I'm gonna head back to the dorm. Try to relax. Really."

He stepped off the deck, hands buried in the soft hoodie, fingers picking at the fabric as he walked. Behind him Woo-jae was already dialing a number, voice low as the ocean swallowed the rest.

The next day started with a presentation.

Dong-ha, the field guide, stood center stage of the dim auditorium, a pane of glass towering behind him like an endless night sky. Beyond it drifted creatures bigger than anything in the entrance tanks—sharks slicing the blue with lazy precision, a slow-moving squid trailing ribbons of ink-dark shadow, seahorses clinging to strands of swaying kelp. Breeds of fish Gyu-jin couldn't even name ghosted through the water like fragments of a dream.

Dong-ha's voice carried easily, warm and sure. He spoke about balance, about how every life inside that tank fed another. How the entire ecosystem would crumble if even one piece disappeared.

Gyu-jin barely heard the science. But his mind kept stilling on the word *depended*—the way Dong-ha said it, like it was a law no one could escape.

"Although the larger fish will often feast on the smaller ones, that's how the ecosystem survives," Dong-ha continued, gesturing toward a shadow that turned out to be a shark. "If the small ones weren't the unfortunate victims, the larger ones would starve and the reef itself would collapse. Every fish is essential to another—prey or predator, each one keeps the ocean alive."

His hand cut through the air, pointing at a slow, hulking predator gliding past the glass. "Even the dangerous ones are part of the balance."

The words should've been background noise. meant for *tourists and schoolkids, field-trip filler.* But they hit with a weight that made Gyu-jin's chest feel too tight.

The ocean only works because something smaller bleeds first. Because something weaker stays within reach.

He swallowed hard, the salt-slick smell of the tank suddenly sharp in his nose. Maybe that was the natural order—bigger teeth, hungrier stomachs, the rest of the world just learning how to breathe around them. Maybe he was just another piece of the chain, the one meant to flinch so the stronger could keep moving.

A ripple of cold slid down his spine, and it wasn't from the air-conditioning.

Somewhere behind him, a low chuckle—barely a sound, almost a breath. Familiar. Inevitable.

Seong-jun.

Gyu-jin didn't turn. He didn't have to. He felt it anyway: the quiet gravity that always announced him, the pull of someone who didn't ask for space so much as *took it.*

The guide kept talking about reefs and survival. Gyu-jin kept his eyes on the tank, watching a shark cut a perfect circle through the water.

When the presentation wrapped, Dong-ha clapped his hands in satisfaction, grin bright enough to bounce off the glass wall of sharks.

“Next up’s optional,” he announced, voice carrying over the shuffling crowd. “A little teamwork exercise—volleyball on the beach. No pressure if you’d rather watch.”

★ ☆

When the game started, Gyu-jin stayed out. Getting smacked in the face with a ball wasn’t exactly on his bucket list.

From the sidelines it looked less like teamwork and more like a riot—students shrieking, sand flying, curses cracking through the salt air.

Dong-ha seemed to thrive on the chaos, his carefree laugh booming as he called half-hearted warnings: *stand aside when you’re out, don’t swing so hard, watch the language.*

Gyu-jin crouched on the sandy pavement, dragging a finger through the grit, sketching flowers and crooked little faces that the wind erased as fast as he drew them.

A flicker of movement pulled his eyes up.

And they landed on Seong-Jun.

He wasn’t playing either. He stood with Minhyuk and Jihoon, and loose wall of lackeys orbiting them. Cigarette smoke curled between them in blatant defiance, their bodies forming a shield around Seong-Jun and a few others, just so the field guide wouldn’t notice.

Seong-Jun hadn’t texted much today—just a few in the morning, one after the aquarium talk. Gyu-jin couldn’t tell if that was a relief or a warning. His stomach had been tight since the presentation, the words about predators still stuck like a splinter.

He swiped his palm against his cheek and forced his gaze back to the sand.

Then a sudden *thud* snapped his shoulder sideways. Pain flared. A volleyball bounced away, leaving a sting that burned hotter than it should.

He jerked his head up.

A cluster of kids from another class grinned like hyenas. One nudged the other, eyes mean. “Dude, he’s not even gonna snitch. That’s the kid Seong-Jun messes with all the time. He’s a __”

The sentence broke off with a sound like a branch snapping.

A fist—*Seong-Jun’s*—drove the boy to the ground. Blood smeared across the kid’s upper lip as he scrambled, stunned.

Seong-Jun's glare could've cut glass. He followed it with a brutal kick to the gut that ripped a groan from the boy loud enough to silence the game for a heartbeat.

Then Seong-Jun crouched, fisting a hand in the boy's hair and yanking his head back. "You're right," he said, voice low, deliberate. "*The kid I mess with*. Not some motherfucking nobodies."

The grip tightened until the boy hissed. Seong-Jun dragged him across the sand like a discarded bag of laundry and tossed him at Gyu-jin's feet.

Gyu-jin jerked back, breath stuttering. "W—what…why did you—"

Seong-Jun didn't even glance at him. His eyes locked on the faint mark where the ball had hit Gyu-jin's shoulder. *Jaw tight.*

His hand shot out, closing around Gyu-jin's elbow and yanking him upright—right in front of the boy on the ground.

The kid's bravado collapsed. He rushed to his knees, pleading at Seong-Juns feet, words spilling. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

Seong-Jun clicked his tongue, face flat. Then his foot came down on the boy's fingers with a sharp, sick crack.
"Why are you apologizing to me? Did you hit *me* with the ball?"

Around them, the rest of the students looked everywhere but here. That was the rule: don't look, don't get caught in the crossfire.

The boy choked out another groan, and finally Dong-ha noticed. He strode over, voice sharp. "Yah! You boys! What's going on?!"

Gyu-jins heart raced and Seong-Jun even didn't move. Didn't care. His stare stayed on the trembling kid.
"Apologize."

Gyu-jin flinched at the order, panic spiking. "S-Seong-Jun, it's fine—really—" He turned desperately to the boy. "It's fine—I forgive you, okay? It's fine—"

"Forgive him?" Seong-Jun scoffed, grabbing Gyu-jin's wrist, grip like steel. "He hasn't apologized."

The boy's voice cracked. "Ah fuck—I'm sorry! *Fuckgy*…I mean—Gyu-jin! I'm sorry—it was an accident!"

Gyu-jin nodded fast, eager for it to be over, but Seong-Jun only scoffed—a cold, sharp sound. "Weren't you laughing? Now it's an accident?"

Dong-ha finally closed the distance, stomping the sand. "Enough! I don't know how your school runs, but not here!"

He jabbed a pointed finger at the kid on the ground. “You! Up!”

The boy scrambled to stand but Seong-Jun yanked him back by the collar before he could straighten, the grip tight enough to choke.

“Ah, come on!” Dong-ha snapped, frustration sharp.

“This moron,” Seong-Jun cut in, shaking the boy like a rag doll, “hit this kid with a ball—” his eyes flicked to Gyu-jin, then back—“and can’t even apologize without lying through his teeth. You think that’s right?”

Gyu-jin’s pulse hammered. “Seong-Jun—please—it didn’t hurt, I’m fine.”

Seong-Jun’s gaze slid back to him, a knife’s edge, sharp eyes scanned Gyu-jin up and down. He scoffed, then flung the boy forward, making him stumble and cough.
“Should’ve hit you in the head,” he muttered, rolling his shoulder. “Might’ve knocked some sense into you.”

Dong-ha raked a hand through his hair, exasperated. “Yah! You! Come back here!”

Seong-Jun didn’t even break stride. “Fuck off,” he tossed over his shoulder, already walking away.

Gyu-jin’s fingers trembled until a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. He flinched hard.

“Kid, you okay? You weren’t even playing, right?” Dong-ha’s tone softened.

Gyu-jin shook his head. Just a small, quiet no.

Dong-ha sighed, glancing at the retreating figure of the other boy. “Aish… that one who ‘helped’—he isn’t your friend, is he?”

Gyu-jin stilled. For once, someone saw it. No assumptions. No easy labels.

“I don’t know,” Gyu-jin breathed, the words almost nothing.

“How do you not—” Dong-ha cut himself off with a wave. “Alright. You wanna protect him? Fine. We won’t report this. But if anything else happens, you come to me, okay?”

The trembling in Gyu-jin’s hands finally eased.

Not even the teachers at his school bothered to look this closely. Dong-ha didn’t scold, didn’t pry. He just… understood.

“Thank you,” Gyu-jin murmured, eyes down.

Dong-ha gave a short nod and patted his head. “Chin up, kid. You’re here to learn and have fun. Don’t get hung up on the little things.”

He walked off with a shake of his head, muttering under his breath, already scanning the chaos of the game.

Gyu-jin raked a hand through his own hair, tension leaking out in slow drips. He turned toward the dorms, needing quiet. Needing distance.

The lecture in the auditorium felt different now—no longer about survival. This wasn't predator and prey.

This was a leash.

And Seong-Jun held the other end.

★ ☆

Gyu-jin lay flat on his back, eyes locked on the dorm ceiling until the white turned almost silver from the buzzing yellow lights. The quiet pressed in, his own breathing the only sound that seemed real.

He didn't understand any of it.
Why he'd stopped the report.
Why the urge to protect Seong-jun had crawled under his skin and stayed there.
Why Seong-jun had even reacted like that.

It wasn't as if Seong-jun was the only one who ever laid a hand on him. The guy had let his crew rough him up more than once—laughed while they did it. That used to be the pattern.

Used to be.

That word kept snagging like a hook.

Something was shifting. Not just in him. In Seong-jun too.

The violence wasn't random anymore. Gyu-jin could trace it back—each flare-up came only when he strayed, when he drifted out of orbit.

Before, breathing wrong had been reason enough. Back then Seong-jun had got him to steal from his mom without a thought, forced him to snap secret photos of girls' thighs to share and sell in their pack.

None of that now. He couldn't even remember the last time Seong-jun let his lackeys touch him.

And Gyu-jin hated that he understood.
He knew, in some half-formed way, where that rage came from. Didn't want it—hard, no—

but he recognized the spark. And somehow, he didn't resent him for it anymore. He didn't want to throw Seong-jun into a cell or switch schools just to get away.

After that week alone with him, Seong-jun had started to look—human. A brutal, jagged human with a fuse too short to measure, but still.

Maybe that was why Seong-jun kept him close.
Maybe that was why he'd started to change.
Because Gyu-jin would still stay when that fuse went off.

And today… today had been different. Seong-jun had almost stood up for him. It hadn't been like the mess with Taemin—Seong-jun hadn't forced an apology to him back then, hadn't beaten Taemin for Gyu-jin's sake. That had been territory. Ownership.

But earlier?
He'd wanted the kid to apologize to *Gyu-jin.*

Not to Seong-jun.

Like Gyu-jin had feelings now. Like he wasn't just a toy to be kicked until it broke.

The thought lodged deep and sharp. Too much. All of it.

He pushed upright, raking both hands through his hair as if he could shake the storm out of his skull. Air—he needed air.

Outside, the courtyard buzzed with low voices and the shuffle of sand-coated shoes. The late sky bled from burnt orange into a heavy indigo, a few thin stars pricking through. Wind skimmed his face, carrying flecks of grit.

He sat on a bench just outside their dorm, the courtyard stretching a little way in front of him where the crowd thinned.

Somewhere to his left, Woo-jae's voice cut the hum, crisp and critical:
"Is the faculty not paying their employees enough? The cold tap barely works. The flooring's scattered with sand—unbearable to walk on. Is there no cleaning team?"

Gyu-jin almost laughed under his breath. The ridiculous normalcy settled his pulse, if only for a heartbeat. He let his gaze drift across the courtyard toward the faint glow of the tuck shop.

That's when he saw him.

Young-dong.

He hadn't caught sight of him all trip. And now there he was, stepping out through the sun-bleached glass doors, a chocolate bar loose in his hand. He turned—and their eyes locked.

Gyu-jin's body went cold. Young-dong froze too. No glare. No obvious anger. Just a long, unreadable stare stretched tight as a wire.

Gyu-jin raised a hand in a small, awkward wave. It felt mechanical, his wrist stiff. Young-dong's lips pressed into a hard line. He gave the smallest shake of his head, then pivoted and walked away.

The air left Gyu-jin's lungs in a slow, sinking sigh. His hand dropped to his side, fingers curling into his palm as he stared at the sand skimming across his shoes.

"How long are we going to be like this…" he whispered, the words lost to the wind.

His phone buzzed.

Gyu-jin reached for it, but his fingers froze as Woo-jae dropped onto the bench beside him, the wood groaning under the sudden weight. The guy radiated irritation, shoulders stiff like he'd just lost a war.

"The employees on this horrid beach are incredibly insolent," Woo-jae snapped, voice tight. "My complaints went straight over their heads."

He whipped his head toward Gyu-jin, glasses flashing under the dim courtyard light.
"Do you know what that vermin said to me? *'Your school is leaving tomorrow morning, so stop being so stuck up and just suck it up till then.'"*

An angry huff shot out of him, then a sharp and theatrical turn away. "Seriously—I'm a student, for goodness' sake. One whose school salary helps feed his insidious family. How in God's name can he speak to me like that?"

Gyu-jin blinked at him. He might've laughed at the outburst if his own mood hadn't already bottomed out after seeing Young-dong.
"Well… you weren't exactly being the nicest to him either."

Woo-jae snapped back to him. His glare could've cut glass. But it faltered when he caught that Gyu-jin wasn't even looking his way, eyes down, expression dulled.
"And what tragedy has the universe handed you this time?" he asked, softer but still edged.

Gyu-jin leaned back, fingers tangling and untangling in his lap. "…I saw Young-dong again. I tried to wave at him and… he just walked off."

Woo-jae adjusted his glasses, gaze sliding away like it was the most trivial thing he'd ever heard.
"Friends come and go, Gyu-jin. Stop being ridiculous. If you're that hung up on it, just talk to him. I'm sure you can clear up whatever nonsense Seong-jun stuffed into his gullible head."

The name hit like a cold stone. Gyu-jin swallowed hard.
"…I don't even know what I'd tell him. I don't really know what's going on myself, so there's no way I'd have a good enough explanation."

"That's a lot of *don't knows,"* Woo-jae said, clinical. "But you're not wrong. Prioritize untangling that bizarre relationship of yours before you chase your friend."

Gyu-jin stayed quiet. Still, it was something—confirmation that not rushing after Young-dong wasn't the wrong choice. His fringe shadowed his face as he stared at the sand swirling around his shoes, breathing slow but heavy.

Woo-jae tilted his head, studying him like a sad kid left behind at the playground.
"Seriously—"

He stood abruptly. Gyu-jin's eyes flicked up, caught off guard. Woo-jae gestured for him to get up too.
"Listen, Gyu-jin. You're not going to figure anything out by irreducibly running away. Yes, it's Seong-jun, but…" He paused, as if even saying the name was absurd, then rolled his eyes. "You're clearly attached to him for some dubious reason. So face the problem directly. The problem being—" he raised his brows, prompting.

Gyu-jin muttered, barely audible, "…Seong-jun."

"Precisely." Woo-jae's nod was brisk, almost surgical. "Normally I'd suggest to just talk it out, but considering the problem is a psychotic asshole, I doubt conversation will interest him. Test the waters first. See what kind of monstrosity is pacing in his head instead of shouldering it all yourself."

Gyu-jin stilled. Woo-jae was—helpful. *Was everyone changing today?*

Finally he exhaled. "Yeah. You're right… I guess I can't keep running." His voice dropped. "…Nothing's going to resolve like that."

"Now you're getting it. So act. Go find Seong-jun—preferably now." Woo-jae's gaze scanned his wind-tossed hair, the mess of it from too many frustrated hands. "But first, let's make you look less disheveled."

He reached out, fingers grazing Gyu-jin's hair.

Panic slammed through him. Gyu-jin jerked back, sharp.
"Don't touch me." The words came out harder than he meant. Woo-jae froze, eyes widening before a scoff slipped out.

"Sorry—*fuck*... I didn't mean to snap. It's just… if Seong-jun saw, you know…"

Woo-jae rolled his eyes, hand settling on his hip. "There's zero normality in any of this, but fine. I'm not about to tell you to pull yourself together." A dry shrug. "Love wins, I guess."

Gyu-jin's eyes went wide. "It's not love—*what the hell*. I don't even know if I don't hate him anymore… seriously, what are you on…"

Woo-jae laughed then, not his usual cutting laugh but something genuinely amused, like Gyu-jin's instant rushed defense cracked through his composure.
"This is almost too entertaining. I haven't actually laughed in a while."

Gyu-jin narrowed his eyes, a sharp scoff escaping.

Then his phone buzzed again.

The sound sliced the moment clean. His stomach dropped—he'd forgotten entirely about the unread message.

His fingers scrambled for the device.

[crazy bastard]
Found you

Heart hammering, he looked up fast. Woo-jae raised an eyebrow at the sudden panic flaring across Gyu-jin's face.

"Fuck—Woo-jae, leave. Like—right now. I'll explain later—"

But his words died when a hand closed around his wrist—hard.

The grip bit down like a clamp, the kind that promised bruises before morning. A yank, sudden and violent, dragged him back so fast the distance between him and Woo-jae felt like a yard.

Seong-jun's gaze pinned him in place, cold and unreadable.

His fingers dug in deeper, each one a nail pressing to bone, and his eyes—*black and hollow*—carved straight through Gyu-jin. Not just angry. Something worse.

Then Seong-jun's other hand slid up and caught his face, thumb pressing cruelly into the hinge of his jaw until his teeth clicked. He leaned in, close enough that his breath burned against Gyu-jin's ear.

"Stay."

One word. A command that landed heavier than it should have. It punched through Gyu-jin's chest, set his heart ricocheting.

"S-Seong-jun—wait, wait…please…I didn't— I didn't see the texts—he didn't do anything —"

The pleas barely left his mouth before Seong-jun turned away, already dismissing them. "One minute rule, Gyu-jin," he tossed over his shoulder, the syllables cold and casual.

Woo-jae stupidly, stupidly, stood his ground, arms crossed, foot tapping—pride like a noose around his neck. He had watched Seong-jun shove Gyu-jin aside as if he were nothing.

"If you're thinking of inflicting violence on me for breathing next to your precious boyfriend, I'd like to tell you—"

The bravado shattered mid-sentence.
Seong-jun's foot slammed into Woo-jae's stomach with a dull, vicious thud. The sound made Gyu-jin flinch. Woo-jae folded, coughing hard, glasses skittering across the floor.

Seong-jun didn't even bother taking his hands out of his pockets. He only tilted his head, a slow motion, watching Woo-jae's body struggle to catch breath.

"You—are you insane?!" Woo-jae wheezed between coughs, eyes blazing. "Could you even comprehend what I was about to say?!"

Seong-jun ignored him entirely.
He crouched, almost lazy, and plucked the fallen glasses from the floor.

Gyu-jin's stomach dropped.
Yesterday's warning slammed back into him—*Let him get too close and I'll smash his glasses into his fucking eye.*

A sharp crack split the air.
The frame snapped in two between Seong-jun's fingers.

Woo-jae's eyes went wide. "Yah! What the hell is wrong with you?! Do you know how much a frame like that costs?!"

He was serious. Holy shit, he was serious.

Panic surged hot and wild. Gyu-jin darted forward.
"Seong-jun! *F-fuck*—please! Please… he really didn't do anything…"

Seong-jun's gaze slid to him, slow and heavy, like a blade turning.
Gyu-jin grabbed at his sleeve, desperate. "Please…you're—*please don't hurt the wrong people instead of me…"*

Seong-jun's eyes narrowed, the faintest curl of a smile ghosting across his mouth. He rolled his tongue against the inside of his cheek, a silent dare.

"Is that what you want?" His voice was low, dangerous. "You want me to hurt you?"

The words cut straight through the air.

He scoffed once—*sharp*—and grabbed Gyu-jin's wrist, wrenching a startled yelp from him. Then Seong-jun drove him back, pinning him to the wall with a brutal thud that rattled through Gyu-jin's ribs.

His fingers clamped around Gyu-jin's jaw, thumb pressing until the bone ached, the other hand a hard weight against the wall beside his head. Warm breath grazed Gyu-jin's cheek.

"You know," Seong-jun murmured, grip tightening, "I don't think this is your fault anymore."
The words slid low, dangerous. "It's not like I haven't hurt you in front of everyone, but…"
He leaned in until their noses almost touched. "They still don't get it. Not enough to stay away."

He turned Gyu-jin's face just enough for his voice to ghost his ear. "So maybe I should show them. Show them *exactly* who owns you."

Heat flared up Gyu-jin's neck, panic and something worse twisting together. He understood exactly what Seong-jun meant, and if it wasn't pain, there was only one other possibility.

Gyu-jin jerked his head toward him, voice cracking. *"W-wait—Seong-jun… stop. Not here, please."*

"Stop?" Seong-jun's thumb began a slow, mocking circle against Gyu-jin's cheek, a cruel imitation of comfort through the bruising grip. "When the fuck did you start ordering me around?"

Gyu-jin's breath quickened. Beyond Seong-jun's shoulder, the courtyard blurred with students pretending not to stare, trying their hardest not to break that unsaid rule of always ignoring any school violence, his eyes darted back, then dropped.

"Please… not—" His small fingers wrapped around Seong-jun's wrist, words dissolving to a whisper. *"…not here."*

With all the strength he could muster, Gyu-jin pried Seong-jun's hand from his face. But his fingers stayed wrapped around Seong-jun's wrist—he wasn't trying to bolt or shove him away. Instead, he tugged, sudden and sure.

For once Seong-jun was caught off guard—enough that a dry scoff slipped out instead of the usual bite. He let Gyu-jin pull him anyway. He tugged Seong-jun around the corner.

Out of sight, Gyu-jin stilled. Eyes drifting to the floor, voice barely a breath: *"Here… do it here…"*

Seong-jun let out a short, dry laugh. He tilted his head, feigning innocence. "Do what?"

Gyu-jin tipped his head sideways, cheeks burning despite his effort to hide it. "You know… Seong-jun…" The words slipped out more like a shiver than a sentence.

"No," Seong-jun drawled, as if considering the idea. "I don't." He caught Gyu-jin's jaw again, forcing their eyes to meet. His voice dropping lower. "Show me. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Gyu-jin's pulse hammered. He hesitated, couldn't manage to move, couldn't do it.
"…I can't. I can't do it."

Seong-jun let his eyes roam over the smaller boy, jaw tightening as he rolled his tongue against his teeth. "Useless bitch."

In the next instant, he slammed Gyu-jin back against the wall. The impact stole a startled whimper from Gyu-jin, pain sparking down his spine.

His hand caught in Gyu-jin's hair, the other pressed against the wall. Gyu-jin's pulse thumped in frantic rhythm, breath short and ragged. Seong-jun leaned in, lips brushing dangerously close—but stopped.

"Don't feel like it."

The moment he let go, he shoved Gyu-jin's head into the wall, slid his hands into his pockets, and walked away like it was nothing.

"What the hell…" Gyu-jin muttered into his sleeve, the words barely audible.

"Follow." Seong-jun's voice sliced the quiet, flat and commanding, already moving away without a backward glance.

Gyu-jin dragged a hand through his hair, confusion and heat tangling in his chest. *Is he actually like—bipolar?*

He sighed, the sound small, and still followed. Quiet. Obedient.

★ ☆

Gyujin trailed after Seong-Jun all the way to the tuckshop, the door closing behind them with the tired chime of a bell that had seen better days. A single yellow light buzzed overhead, flickering every few seconds, casting the cramped shop in a dull, nicotine-stained glow.

Seong-Jun moved like he owned the place, lazy and sure, fingers tapping along each shelf as he wandered. Gyujin followed a step behind, nails worrying at the skin around his knuckles until it smarted.

"You weren't at dinner." Seong-Jun's finally voice cut through the long stretch of silence they'd walked here with.

Gyujin's steps faltered. The normalcy of the question threw him.
"…Wasn't hungry," he murmured, even as the hollow ache in his stomach mocked him.

Seong-Jun gave a slow nod, the kind that said he didn't buy a single word. "Yeah. Sure." He kept strolling, fingertips trailing along a row of snacks until—tap—he stopped abruptly. "Either way you weren't missing out. Food's shit, fucking hate seafood."

He grabbed two bags of chips and turned back tossing them carelessly.

Gyujin barely managed to catch them, blinking when he realized there were two.

Seong-Jun tilted his chin toward the counter, lazy command in the gesture. "Put them on the counter. Wait there, I'll be back."

His shoulders loosened as he pulled out his phone and walked right past, already dialing.

From the counter, Gyujin could hear his low voice somewhere outside the shop—something about an extra lighter, cigarettes, a name he couldn't make out. Probably Minhyuk or Jihoon.

The woman behind the register looked like she'd lived on smoke and salt air for decades, the smell of cigarettes wrapping the space around her. Sunglasses hid her eyes even though the sky outside was dark, and a loose teal beach shirt slouched off one shoulder. Barefoot, legs crossed on the counter, she flipped through a warped magazine like this was her living room.

Every time she glanced up, she caught him sneaking looks at the sun-bleached glass door, waiting like a kid left behind.

Gyujin bit his lip.

Maybe I should just pay.

It wasn't like Seong-Jun hadn't bought things for him before. His mom had given him allowance money he hadn't touched. They were leaving tomorrow anyway.

Yeah. He could do this once.

He pulled out a crumpled ₩5000 note and slid it across the counter.

The woman finally looked up, then lazily leaned forward and shoved the bill into the register. "Enjoy, doll. And tell your buddy out there we don't sell ciggies to minors."

Gyujin managed a faint smile, a small bow of his head. "Thank you, ma'am."

He slid the packets off the counter and pushed through the door.

Behind him, her sudden theatrical gasp followed. "Ma'am? Do I *really* look that old? Is it the glasses?" she muttered at a tiny mirror.

Outside, Seong-Jun barely spared him a glance, still talking into his phone. Now it wasn't even about a lighter—just some trivial back-and-forth, like he might never step back inside.

Gyujin bit the inside of his cheek and stretched his hand out, the foil packet held between them like a peace offering.

That's when Seong-Jun stopped mid-sentence. He didn't even bother with a goodbye—just hung up.

He raised a brow, eyes flicking to the chips as he took them from Gyujin, his mouth curling into the faintest smirk.

"Geez," he drawled, voice a slow tease. "Park Gyujin paying for my food…" He leaned in, close enough for the words to slip low and sharp. "…saying *'nice things about me'* to his mom."

Then he stepped back deliberately, just to watch Gyujin's eyes go wide, and turned on his heel. "The world must be ending."

Heat shot up Gyujin's neck. He scrambled to catch up. "Wait wait wait, Seong-Jun, what did my mom say? Like—*ah, seriously Mom…*" His words tripped over each other, fast and

breathless, fading as quickly as they came.

Seong-Jun only chuckled, a single careless shrug as they walked. “She said enough.”

★ ☆

The two boys sat on a bench right on the sand, the crash of waves only a few feet ahead. Wind hissed through the dunes, filling the silence between them. The sky had almost drowned to black, the sea still catching streaks of blue light that shivered and broke with every swell.

When Seong-Jun finished eating, he crumpled the chip packet and flicked it into the sand. Gyujin startled—not at the sound, but at the fact that he’d just thrown trash on the beach. The one thing you never did.

Seong-Jun didn’t care. Didn’t even glance at him. He leaned back, eyes locked on the water. “Heard that friend of yours punched you in front of everyone.” A low snort. “Real hero.”

Gyujin’s face faltered. His gaze dropped. *Why does he have to bring that up?*
“Yeah… it’s understandable though… he was probably just upset that… you told him and… well, he doesn’t exactly like you, so… he was just—”

Seong-Jun tilted his head,

That’s what he thinks happened? —seriously? Alright. That works.

He swallowed a laugh and shrugged, eyes back on the waves.
“Didn’t tell that kid a shit. He’s pissed you disappeared on him for days, then couldn’t get a word out when he tried to ask why.”

Another slower glance—just to catch the sadness in Gyujin’s eyes.
“Told you he didn’t give a shit about you.”

Gyujin’s heart seemed to slow. He raised his eyes, hesitant.
“What…? No, he wouldn’t be that upset just because—he’s gone silent for days and I haven’t… like, two weeks ago—”

“Exactly, Gyujin.” Seong-Jun cut in, voice slicing clean. “You’re the one always all lenient, never prying into his life like a damn cop. The second you disappear, *it’s a problem.”*

He brushed a thumb across Gyujin’s lip, flicking away a crumb. The touch was casual, possessive.
“See what happens when you don’t listen to me? If you just did what I said instead of fucking around it, none of this would’ve happened.”

Two fingers tapped against Gyujin's hand, slow and cruel.
"Second time, Gyujin. Second time you didn't listen and proved you *just really* don't know what's good for you."

Gyujin curled his fingers tight around his sleeve.

Seong-Jun doesn't care about me—so why… why does everything—why does he have to be right. everything I do to run—fucking just…. He's not…he can't be the only person whose…

Seong-Jun watched him fall into that thought. That only Seong-Jun knew what was good for him.

He's fucking cute when he's sad.

He threaded his fingers through Gyujin's hair. The smaller boy didn't flinch, only loosened under the touch.

"You don't have to look so damn sad," Seong-Jun murmured. "When you do what I tell you, nothing bad happens. Remember when you were at my place, before you pissed me off at the mall? Anything happen?"

"…No." The admission scraped out low.

"Yeah, because you were good for me. Stop fucking thinking and just be good. pathetic little boys don't need to use their brain, they just listen. Okay?"

Gyujin's grip on his sleeve tightened until his knuckles ached. Slowly, he lifted his eyes, barely moving.
"I'll listen. I'll be good… I promise." The words were soft enough to drown in the wind, but his eyes—*empty of fight*—were all Seong-Jun's.

"You will?" Seong-Jun tapped his cheek with the same fingers that had combed his hair. "Not like you get a choice."

Gyujin's inhale hitched. Seong-Jun leaned back, flicked a lighter. The flame guttered in the wind, died. He flicked again. Out.
"Seriously hate this shitty beach wind," he muttered, shoving the lighter into his pocket.

Gyujin picked at his sleeve, trying to let the breeze cool the nerves Seong-Jun always managed to wreck.
"…this is actually my first time at a beach," he said finally.

Seong-Jun looked over, a short disbelieving laugh escaping.
"Would've thought your loving mother dragged her precious son on vacations at least once."

"..She can't really leave the restaurant long enough.." Gyujin shrugged just slightly. "…can't really afford it."

Seongjun just clicked his tongue and turned back. Like he was already disinterested.
"And you don't have a fucking dad either," Seong-Jun added, then side-eyed him. "Probably

why you look like that.”

Gyu-jin furrowed his brows, eyes sliding to Seong-jun “…Like what?”

“So you’ve never been in the ocean,” Seong-Jun said, ignoring the question completely. Not really a guess—an order of fact.

Gyujin only nodded.

The corner of Seong-Jun’s mouth twitched into a smirk. He stood suddenly, grabbed Gyujin’s wrist, and yanked him up.
“What’re you—”
Before he could finish, he was pulled by his wrist into the shore, wasn’t dragged in too far. Just enough for cold water meet his knees.

He barely caught his balance before a wall of spray met his face.

“Seong-Jun—what the hell?!” He coughed, wiping salt from his eyes.

Seong-Jun’s laugh cut through the crash of waves. “Your face looks fucking dumb right—”

A splash stalled him mid-sentence. He wiped water from his face, eyes narrowing on Gyujin.

Gyujin tried to hold back a laugh; it broke through anyway.

Seong-Jun’s mouth twitched. “Right. Okay.”

Back and forth—two, three, maybe more—wet sand shifting under their feet, the ocean drumming against their legs, until a stronger wave slammed into them and Gyujin stilled, breath caught.

Seongjun just stared at him, and then he was closer, his hand cold and firm around Gyu-jin’s wrist. “You can’t swim, can you?” The question cutting through the crash of the waves.

Gyu-jin just shook his head, a spray of icy water flying from his hair.

A sound that was half-laugh, half-scoff slipped out of him. Before Gyu-jin could react, Seong-jun’s arm was around his waist, pulling him up. Gyu-jin basically yelped, his legs wrapping around Seongjun’s hips on pure instinct.

“Wait-w-why are you--"

Seong-jun ignored him, a few steps deeper into the ocean until the water hit right to the middle of Gyu-jin's back. Then he stopped.

“I could kill you right now.” Seongjun’s voice was loud against the waves, Gyu-jin's face paled, and he instinctively reeled himself back, his fingers gripping into Seong-jun’s shoulders as their eyes locked into each others.

“What?!”

“Do it. Do what I told you to do earlier.”

Gyu-jin swore his heart flatlined. He wasn't sure if it was because of the roaring ocean around him or the fact that he knew exactly what Seong-jun meant.

“Now. Gyu-jin. Kiss me or I’ll drown you.”

Seongjun didn’t look like he was joking, and Gyu-jin couldn’t even tell anymore. His voice was a harsh command over the crashing waves. Water dripped from his sharp features, glistening in the dim night light.

Gyu-jin’s heart raced, faster than he thought it could. He froze, beads of water tracing a cold path from his hair down the curve of his nose.
His fingers on Seongjun’s shoulders were trembling, almost faltering, but then—

A wave, a little too harsh, hit them. Seong-jun didn’t even stumble. Gyu-jin winced, his body jolting as he clung tighter.

Seongjun probably laughed, Gyu-jin thought, but he couldn’t even hear it past the waves. He pulled back fast, Gyu-jin’s small fingers still clutched on his shoulders. Without another thought, Gyu-jin’s soft, trembling lips met Seong-jun’s.

But then he pulled back, too quick for Seongjun to even register it as anything. He just blinked. Then a quick, bitter scoff escaped him before he flicked his eyes away.

“This fucking…”

Seongjun’s hand shot up to the back of Gyu-jin’s neck, pulling him in with sudden force. Their lips crashed together. Gyu-jin let out a sudden choked gasp. The taste of salt water immediately stung on their lips. But Gyu-jin didn’t push. He kissed back, didn’t even try pull away. His shaking fingers tightened on Seong-jun’s shoulders, and Seong-jun’s hand tangled roughly into the smaller boy’s wet hair.

Gyu-jin whimpered into Seongjun’s mouth when the taller boy tightened his fingers in his hair. He buckled involuntarily against Seongjun’s waistband, not even noticing. And that’s when Seongjun pulled back, but not too far. Just enough to see Gyu-jin's flushed face and glassy eyes. Heat radiating through his short pants despite the cold water.

“You did that on purpose.” Seongjun’s voice was dangerously low, breathy and hoarse.

“What—“ Gyu-jin could barely hear him through the waves, but his words turned into nothing when Seongjun tightened his grip on his waist and pulled them through the waves and out of the ocean.

He dropped himself to the sand, taking Gyu-jin with him. The smaller boy was placed squarely in his lap. Gyu-jin’s trembling fingers finally released their desperate hold on Seong-jun’s shoulders.

“…I really thought you were going to kill me…” The words were barely a whisper, a soft admission of the fear still rushing through his veins.

Seong-jun shrugged a shoulder with mild indifference through heavy breaths. “I probably would’ve if you didn’t kiss me.”

He paused, his eyes moving over Gyu-jin’s body. The shallow pants that lifted his shoulders with every breath, the flush on his lips, the pink of his nose from the cold water.

“But that really doesn’t matter right now.”

He shifted, flipped Gyu-jin over onto the sand. Gyu-jin winced as his back hit the cool ground.

“Your shirt. Take it off.” His tone was flat; not a suggestion.

Gyu-jin’s eyes widened slightly, his body burning with a foreign heat. His lip trembled as he spoke.
“W-why…”

“It’s fucking soaked. It’ll be annoying.”

Gyu-jin hesitated, biting his lip. His fingers slowly found the bottom of his shirt, and he carefully pulled it over his head, his damp hair falling back onto his face.

Seongjun went still for just a moment, his gaze lingering over Gyu-jin’s slim body, the faint pink of his skin, the way his body trembled from something other than the cold, the little stutters of his heaving chest.

“You look really fucking breakable.”

Then, in one fluid motion, he pulled off his own shirt, pushed Gyu-jin back down into the sand, and his hand clamped around Gyu-jin’s wrist, instantly pinning it to ground. Gyu-jin winced at the sudden force, but the sound was choked off as Seongjun's fingers found his jaw and their lips crashed together.

His grip held Gyu-jin’s jaw in place as he moved, not too tight, but just enough to demand a response. And Gyu-jin did. He tried to kiss back, but this kiss wasn't like the one in the sea. This was too much, too fast, like a thin thread of restraint had snapped.

Seong-jun pulled away, letting Gyu-jin slightly breathe, his fingers still on the smaller boy’s jaw. He forced Gyu-jin’s head to the side, his voice trailing right against his ear.

“You moved right onto my fucking dick earlier.”

Gyu-jin’s face flushed a violent crimson. “I did…?” His words came out soft and shuddering. “I didn’t… I didn’t mean to…”

Seong-jun shifted his jaw just slightly, forcing their eyes to lock. “You still did either way.” His voice dropped low. “How did you expect me to respond?”

In a blink Seong-jun's lips were on his again, a sudden, possessive kiss. The kind he didn’t need ask for, just took. His hand moved from smallers jaw to his throat. Gyu-jin whimpered

into his mouth at the heated touch, but Seongjun's fingers got tighter, and tighter, until a sudden, deliberate pressure—it was too tight. Gyu-jin could barely breathe. He twisted under Seong-jun, his face jerking to the side.

"...too hard..." Gyu-jin's words were clipped pants. *"...too much... Seongjun..."* His voice was barely audible through the pressure on his throat.

Seongjun didn't immediately let go. He let the smaller struggle under him for a little longer before he suddenly released him, his hand didn't move far, just ghosting over Gyu-jin's throat.

Gyu-jin let out heavier pants as the pressure was released, his eyes glassy, desperately trying to catch his breath. Then slowly through fluttered damp lashes his eyes met back to the taller boy.

Seongjun's eyes were locked on Gyu-jin, full of a different kind of held-back hunger.

"Did that hurt?" Seongjun's voice was laced with mock pity.

Gyu-jin tried to steady his breathing. "…Yeah…" A short breath slipped out. "…a little."

Seongjun raised his brows, a smirk playing on his lips that held something darker. "Just a little?" He moved his hand down Gyu-jin's chest, sliding it down against his torso until just the tip of his fingers slipped under Gyu-jin's waistband. *"Then, should I make it hurt a lot?"*

Gyu-jin's eyes widened, flushed lips parting in a shaken inhale.

But then—*shit*—his hand shot down, grabbing Seongjun's wrist, stopping it dead in his waistband.

Seongjun's jaw twitched, his eyes shadowed. "I'm not dealing with your bitching again—"

But Gyu-jin's other hand shot up, quickly covering Seongjun's mouth before he could finish the sentence.

Behind them, a voice, then two.

"I swear I heard something out here!"

A flashlight skimmed the sand. Gyu-jin pulled Seong-jun down to his side.

"Man, are you okay? There's nothing here! These kids wouldn't even be out here at this time!"

A frustrated groan—from what sounded like a security guard.

"Aishhh— yeah, yeah, maybe I was hearing things, probably the waves or something."

When the footsteps left, and the waves were the only other sound besides the two boys,

Seongjun laughed—*a real, heavy laugh,* as if the whole thing was ridiculously hilarious.

“That was fucking funny.”

Then he sat up, sighed hard like the laughter had exhausted him.

“Yeah…alright. I’ll stop. Actually don’t want sand on my dick.”

Gyu-jin followed, pushing himself upright and bringing his wrist to his face, failed attempt at hiding the flushed embarrassment.

Seong-jun let his gaze slide to Gyu-jin, slowly, catching on the pale stretch of skin where seawater clung in tiny, stubborn beads.

“First time seeing you without bruises.” His tone was casual, like he was pointing out a crumb on Gyu-jin’s face instead of a history of violence.

Gyu-jin gave a short, airy scoff and drew his knees to his chest, arms wrapping loosely around them.
“Isn’t that a good thing?”

Seong-jun’s eyes drifted back to the dark sweep of waves, shoulders loose in a lazy shrug.
“Preferably not.”

The words hung there, salt-heavy, before he pushed himself upright in one sudden motion.

Gyu-jin’s pulse spiked. That comment about bruises—*was it a warning?* Instinct took over before thought; he scrambled back across the sand.

Seong-jun caught the movement and let out a low scoff, rolling his eyes.
“I’m going to take a piss, retard. I wasn’t gonna hit you.”

Gyu-jin slowly eased and moved back into the position previously he was sat in.

“…How was I supposed to know that…” The reply came muffled, pressed into the crook of his folded arms.

“Read the room, I guess.” Seong-jun’s voice drifted out lazy as he turned toward the shadows beyond the beach, steps unhurried.

Seong-jun trudged back across the sand, muttering under his breath.
“Should’ve just pissed in the water. Bathrooms are a fucking hike.”

He stopped short when the spot where he’d left Gyu-jin was empty.

The boy was crouched a few meters off, ankle-deep where the tide lapped soft and cold. His hands fumbled at something in the wet sand, head bowed. He didn’t look like he was sneaking off. Didn’t even look worried.

He looked…happy.

He looked cute. He looked cute happy too.

Seong-jun's phone was in his hand before he thought about it, camera app open. Through the screen, Gyu-jin looked like he belonged there—small, absorbed, the rest of the world a blur.

Yeah, he was cute happy too.

Seong-jun called out for him. Gyu-jin's head snapped up, but his heartbeat didn't seem to. He didn't jolt up startled. He blinked like he'd known Seong-jun was behind him the whole time.
"There's a starfish right here—it's not even running when I touch it."

That familiar sharp laugh slipped out of Seong-jun, more scoff than humor.
"Are you fucking ten?" He tilted his chin, a wordless order.

Gyu-jin gave the starfish one last glance, then pushed to his feet and started back to Seong-jun.

Seong-jun lounged onto the sand, phone still raised. Gyu-jin dropped beside him, a bead of water sliding from his hair into his eye. He swiped it away, noticing the camera.
"…Why are you filming?"

"Because you looked really stupid," Seong-jun said, lazy as ever.

Gyu-jin let out a half-laugh, half-scoff, eyes turning back to the waves. He didn't really mind.
"I told you I've never been to a beach before. It's just…cool, I guess."

Seong-jun shrugged, barely a movement.
"You looked normal for once."

"…I'm always normal," Gyu-jin mumbled, a small laugh catching in his throat.

Seong-Jun suddenly leaned in, camera shoving closer until the lens almost brushed Gyu-jin's cheek.
"You are? *Were you normal when I touched—*"

Heat shot up Gyu-jin's neck. He shoved the phone away frantically.
"*Okay-okay—*Not normal, stop filming, stop filming"

Seongjun nodded slowly, more of a confirmation of the obvious than a nod of agreement as he clicked off, stopping the video. The faintest hint of a real smile flickered as he set the phone aside and leaned back, palms sinking into the sand.

Gyu-jin pulled his knees up, arms folding tight across them.

"Actually hate the beach," Seong-jun said out of nowhere, voice still even.

Gyu-jin didn't look over. The wind carried their words like stray threads.
"I figured…when you said you didn't like seafood…and the wind…and when you littered."

A quiet scoff. “You taking notes on me now?”

“…You made it pretty obvious. I didn’t know if I should say anything.”

No change in Seong-jun’s face when Gyu-jin finally glanced at him. Always unreadable. Then Seong-jun shifted forward, elbows sliding against his knees.

“Reminds me of vacations with my idiot parents,” he said, eyes on the horizon.

Gyu-jin’s gaze followed. “I wasn’t going to ask,” he murmured—It wasn’t a dismissal, a gentle acknowledgment that he knew when to stop reaching.

Seong-jun eased a little.
Yeah. Gyujin never asks.
Never asked for a reason for why this all started, the fights, the empty house, not even for the damn kiss.
Like he didn’t need reasoning.
Didn’t need reasoning for staying. He just did, just stayed.

A short breath of a laugh escaped him. “You’re fucking weird Gyu-jin.”

The wind tangled Gyu-jin’s hair as he let out the same dry half-laugh.
“…I like it..”

Something flickered—Seong-jun’s grin slipping for a heartbeat. Their eyes met; Gyu-jin’s widened, scrambling to fix his wording.
“The beach—i like it…It’s nice..”

Seong-jun drew in a slow breath, eyes returning to the dark waves.
“Right. The beach.”

For a while, they just stayed like that. Gyu-Jin curled in on himself, knees tight to his chest, chin resting on the folded cradle of his arms. Seong-Jun leaned back on his palms, fingers dug into the cool sand, letting the hiss of waves and the low hum of the wind fill the space between them. Night wrapped around them like ink, the beach’s faint nightlife a distant, electric buzz. Salt dried on their skin in a thin crust.

Then a sound slid through the quiet—soft, almost a whimper, too careful to be a snore.
Seong-Jun’s eyes cut sideways.
“Did he seriously fall asleep?” The words came out low, more scoff than question.

He scrubbed an irritated hand over his face. But his gaze lingered anyway. The slow rise and fall of Gyu-Jin’s shoulders. The way moonlight glazed the damp on his skin, softening every edge. It dragged up a memory he hadn’t asked for—Gyu-Jin half curled on the counter top in Seong-Jun’s kitchen that night, breathing like he trusted the air. Peaceful. Untouchable.

The irritation thinned, not gone but dulled, like a knife held under water. He should leave. He wanted to.

A heavier wave slammed the shore, spraying cool grit across his ankles. The tide was climbing faster than he'd thought.

Yeah, great. If the idiot actually drowned out here, that'd be a real headline.

★ ☆

He ended up at the door of Gyu-Jin's dorm. Of course he did. He could drop him and walk—no one said he had to play the boyfriend.

The door swung open before he even knocked.

"Not this fucker," Seong-Jun muttered, the words leaking irritation.

Woojae stood there, wide awake, eyes flat as a pane of glass. Like he'd been waiting to scold.

Most people would flinch at the sight of someone who'd almost beaten them to death. Woojae just looked Seong-Jun up and down, then let his gaze slide to the half-dead weight in his arms and back again, brow arching.

"Is he dead?"

Seong-Jun's eyes narrowed. Then flicked his eyes away with a scoff. "I seriously can't wait to smash your skull in."

"I'll take that as a no. I suggest you leave him here and get lost before I call security." He adjusted the new frames with a light touch, as if to say *try harder next time.* "Considering you're both missing shirts, it won't be hard to figure out."

A sharp click of Seong-Jun's tongue—mock disbelief, sharper than a laugh. Then he let Gyu-Jin drop.

Woo-jae caught the limp arm before it hit the floor, the motion yanking Gyu-Jin half awake. He blinked, disoriented, while Woo-jae shot Seong-Jun a look that could've sliced concrete.

"Are you—this is borderline domestic—!"

The door slammed in his face, cutting him off.

"Many, many undiagnosed mental disorders," Woo-jae muttered, voice icy enough to frost glass.

When Gyu-jin eased upright he stepped back with the faint disgust of someone handling something contaminated.

“You too,” he added, eyes hard. “You both have something chronically wrong with your brains.”

Gyu-Jin only rubbed at his eyes, half a wave tossed backwards. “Yeah, yeah.” His voice was a tired mumble as he dragged his feet toward the bed and collapsed.

The early morning hissed with bus brakes and diesel breath around the entrance of the center. Dong-ha had launched into some endless farewell speech—how lovely it was to host their school, how much he hoped they’d “learned something.” It dragged on so long half the students were already halfway to the buses with their minds, itching to get gone.

Engines rumbled like low growls as students funneled into the parking lot, their chatter a restless static.

Gyu-Jin stood in the thinning line, rubbing the grit of sleep from his eyes. He’d somehow slept better than usual last night—though maybe *maybe* that was just exhaustion—and Dong-ha’s brand of sunrise enthusiasm at this hour could put sandpaper to anyone’s nerves.

He shifted against the pavement, inching forward with the crowd, when the too-bright voice cut through the noise.

“Yah! Volleyball kid!”

Gyu-Jin turned just enough to look over his shoulder, hands loosely around the straps of his bag.

Volleyball kid? Really.

Dong-ha waved him over like an air-traffic controller. Gyu-Jin blinked once at Dong-ha, then back at the crowd of line, back at Dong-ha. Didn’t move.

With a sigh dramatic enough to belong on stage, Dong-ha gave up and jogged toward him, sneakers scuffing against the concrete.

“You— aish… seriously.” He landed beside Gyu-Jin like he’d just finished a marathon, hand clapping heavy on his shoulder.

“Did I… forget something?” The confusion in Gyu-Jin’s voice matched the crease in his brow.

Dong-ha dismissed the question with a flick of his hand, as if that could erase the bewilderment.

“You didn’t want to report that kid—but you looked pretty…” He rocked back on his heels, eyes narrowing in exaggerated thought. “Ahhh, how do I put this—” He snapped his fingers.

“Helpless. Yeah.”

Gyu-Jin’s lips parted, a protest half-formed and dying before it could leave. If only an adult had noticed months ago. If only it mattered now.

“So yeah, yeah, I didn’t ask about you directly,” Dong-ha went on, like he was narrating a detective story to himself. “I just asked your homeroom teacher—Mr. Kong… Kon? Kwong? Whatever. I said I was curious if the students were *really this well-behaved at school too*, beating around the bush, yknow? *And that basta*—your teacher—told me you all acted even better in school. So, I figured there’s not much help there.”

He dug into a pocket and pulled out a card, pressing it into Gyu-Jin’s palm with another solid pat to the shoulder.

“If anything happens again—call this number. My old buddy from the military. Guy’s a cop now, but won’t even touch a gun, believes in all things fair and just, you know the type. Helped an old lady holding some sign last time I saw him. He’d help you out, no question.”

Gyu-Jin looked down.
Officer Lee Do.
A name and a number, neat black print.

He stared at it longer than he meant to, eyes tracing the letters until they blurred.

Then he inhaled, slow, and looked back at Dong-ha. A practiced smile eased onto his face like muscle memory.

“Thank you. Really—thank you. You’re the first adult to actually see through this.” He paused, the words felt wrong on his tongue. “But I don’t need it. It’s something I have to handle myself.”

Dong-ha blinked, thrown for half a second, then chuckled and shook his head. He took the card back, another heavy pat to Gyu-Jin’s shoulder.

“You’re one strong kid.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “No offense, but when I first saw you, I thought you’d crumble any minute. Felt bad for you, kid.”

Then his grin snapped back into place, blinding and too wide. “But it seems you’ll sort yourself out, yeah? Can’t expect a helping hand every time things go south.” He pumped a fist in the air. “Keep that attitude!”

“Yeah… thank you,” Gyu-Jin murmured, eyes sliding anywhere but that smile. If he kept staring he’d probably laugh—unintentional.

Dong-ha clapped once, satisfied, and spun on his heel, his whistle-bright energy trailing behind him as he headed off.

Only when the guide’s back disappeared into the crowd did Gyu-Jin finally let the laugh slip, low and quiet under his breath.

Yeah. That guy definitely snorts a line before these speeches.

★ ☆

Inside the bus they were told to sit where they'd sat on the way in.

Gyu-Jin slid into the middle seat he'd shared with Woojae before. Only this time, the seat beside him stayed empty.

He didn't even realized at first. He actually hadn't seen Woojae when he woke up.

A quick lean forward, scanning the aisle—nothing. Not even a glimpse of him.

Gyu-Jin dropped back with a short exhale that came out more like a sigh.

Didn't even get to apologize.
Maybe it was better if he stayed gone. Safer. For his sake.

Woojae wasn't exactly the nicest anyway. *Even if Seong-Jun hadn't lost his shit,* they probably wouldn't have ended up friends.

He shook the thought off, thumb flicking across his phone as he queued up the same shooter game.

Students packed in, voices rising, the bus growing hot with bodies until the seat beside him was the only one still empty.

Every few minutes he glanced up from his screen, just incase if Woojae actually showed, he wouldn't ignore him lost in the game.

Then the low chatter shifted. Heads turned toward the front.

Gyu-Jin pulled an earbud free.

And there he was.

Woojae stood near the driver, voice cutting clean through the noise:
"And just to add as a final statement—I've written every single direction the previous driver followed. I have the police on speed dial. If you miss at least three of these turns I will *immediately* hit the call button." He even gestured at the green emergency button.

The driver muttered a curse and waved him off. "Sit down, kid, you're causing a scene."

A ripple of low, stifled laughter moved through the bus as Woojae stalked down the aisle and dropped into the empty seat.

Gyu-Jin just looked at him—and broke into a quiet laugh.

Woojae's glare sliced over, sharp enough to cut it off mid-breath.
"There is not a single molecule of this situation that even hints at amusement, you irredeemable fiend. This morning has been an absolute disaster." He crossed his arms with a hard exhale.
"And *you*—you're ridiculous. Why did you step in? All he did was break my glasses. Do you think I can't handle a brainless vermin on my own?"

Gyu-Jin narrowed his eyes. *Does he have the survival instincts of a five year old? And mad that someone helped him?*

"Woojae. He snapped your glasses because he was going to actually stab you in the eye with them. That's the only reason I stepped in."

For a second, the icy composure cracked. "You're joking—He was willing to blind me? For goodness sake, has he lost his damn mind?!" Woojae scoffed, tugging his collar like he could straighten the absurdity away. "What on earth has the school's disciplinary committee been doing this whole time—are their ears clogged?!"

Gyu-Jin's nails bit into his palm. He kept his gaze fixed. Yeah, sure. Another victim. But—

"You're a hypocrite, Woojae," he said flatly.

Those narrow eyes slid sideways through the lenses. "Excuse me?"

"Just a few days ago," Gyu-Jin cut in, "you said you didn't care about reports, that you'd rather turn a blind eye. Now you're acting like it's been a huge problem this whole time." He lowered his eyes, a soft scoff under his breath slipped out. "Yeah, you were right about one thing—I guess if it happened to everyone, then they'd all file reports."

Woojae's eyes thinned to a squint, a short puff of air leaving like he was swallowing disbelief. "Do you think I'm not aware of my hypocrisy? It's called being logical, Gyu-Jin. I'm not going to play school counselor for every random kid who gets kicked around. The only reason to care is if it's happening to me."

A low sigh slipped from Gyu-Jin, heavy enough to settle in his chest.
Right. Just like everyone else. Only difference was Woojae's apathy wasn't fear—it was choice.

"Although your words are incredibly dimwitted," Woojae added, adjusting his glasses with clinical precision, "I didn't think you had the ability to speak your mind. Truth be told, you might actually be changing in a positive direction—through that actual psychopath."

"…Whatever, Woojae."

His phone buzzed.

[crazy bastard]
ur face looks rlly stupid at 0:30 lmfao ur retarded

Video: one attachment

The screen lit up cold and bright. Gyu-Jin stared a beat too long, not even opening the video.

He didn't freeze from fear this time. tension didn't spike because Seong-Jun had texted.

It stilled him because a single careless message from that bastard managed to wipe the argument clean off his skin.

Seong-Jun fixed his mood.

And that realization was somehow worse than the fight itself.

Chapter End Notes

Wellll that's the end of this chapter, sort of happier end the this chapter but wonder how gyujin will react if he finds out seongjun made youngdong punch him n manipulated the situation :000 ahahaha I added woojae here too because I wanted him to kinda represent how all the kids I'm the school had overlooked gyujin n never cared unless it affected them yknow ALSO I did post it when there was legit one other seonggyu fic on here or not even any at all so if there's any issues regarding the fic format, tags or ratings pls lmk omf

Chapter 5: Out Of Reach

Chapter Notes

> Arigato! 👋 im sorry for disappearing lmfao i did not abandon this fic on purpose it is a long ass story but i was arrested got 228 rehab instead of prison to get the case closed after rehab its basically like russias version of a low level felony LOLZ anyways (I'll explain on twt so do not get the wrong idea boi I am an angel) I was actually gone for like 2 weeks willingly but thts js bc i had no motivation but I read all the comments when i re-entered civilization and i feel so bad bruh n thank you all for the supportive comments on the last author notes luv u all. i also did some fanart manga type pannels N edits you can see on my twitter linked at the end I made this chapter extra long bc of the wait nd made me add more warning tags to the fic boi. Enjoy enjoy ok #chillonme

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The restaurant hummed with a soft, expensive static—rich laughter, clipped business chatter, the muted clink of crystal. Paper-white lights pooled down from the high ceiling, stark against the night. Floor-to-ceiling windows wrapped the room like glass skin, letting the city smear itself across the dark panes.

Gyujin's fingers hovered above the cutlery, stiff and uncertain. The plate of food beside it looked ridiculous—too perfect, too costly. Pricier than anything he'd ever be able to repay. Especially not to the boy across from him.

"Want me to feed you or some shit?"

The voice cut through his thoughts like a match strike. He tilted his head up.

Seongjun lounged there, bored to the point of cruelty. Fork lazily balanced between long fingers, chin propped on the other hand, elbow hooked against the table. Casual. Too casual. Like this was an everyday thing.

"No—it's just…"

"Should've just gone to some crappy ramen shop," Seongjun interrupted, leaning back, irritation twisting his mouth. "Shit's probably blowing your simple ass mind."

A dry laugh scraped out of Gyujin's throat before he could stop it. He dropped his eyes to the plate.

"…It's just weird. Us being… normal."

Normal.

The lights bled from paper white to a violent red in a single heartbeat.

Seongjun's voice sharpened, uneasy for the first time. "The fuck—"

A foreign scream sliced the room open, high and vicious. The sound carved right through him. Both their heads snapped toward it.

Gyujin barely registered the glass shattering beside them before the sharp tang of gunpowder bit the air. Silence crashed in behind it.

Gyujin's heart stopped. He couldn't breathe, but he wasn't bleeding.

"Seong—Seongjun…"

He barely managed the name before he was on his knees, scrambling to the boy sprawled in front of him, hands shaking so hard they barely worked. His chest felt torn open, pain clawing straight through his ribs. Eyes burned hot; if he blinked, everything would flood.

"No, no—Seongjun… f-fuck… Seongjun…"

"This was the only way to help you, Gyujin."

The voice was too close.

His head snapped toward it. The red light flickered to gold in an instant. Glass walls folded inward, reshaping into tall library shelves. The restaurant dissolved. They were back at school.

"Now things can go back to *normal."*

His hands slid off Seongjun's limp body.

"Youngdong…?"

Darkness swallowed everything.

Gyujin's eyes flew open. He lurched upright in bed, lungs dragging air like he'd been drowning.

A nightmare. Just a really shitty nightmare.

"Ah, fuck…" The words rasped out half asleep. He scrubbed a hand over his eyes, then through his hair, tugging hard enough to sting.

Why the hell was i dreaming about being on a date with Seongjun—and why had Youngdong…? Whatever. Just a dream.

He swung his legs off the mattress and stumbled to the shower.

Later, he slouched on the couch, controller in hand, PUBG gunfire rattling the TV. Breakfast was a single slice of bread jammed between his teeth before he'd even sat down. He just

needed something normal. Familiar. Something to pin him back to the world.

“Gyujin-ah! Turn that down, goodness!”

His mother’s voice sliced through the game’s chaos. He twisted around, thumb already dropping the volume. She stood by the door with her handbag, ready for work.

“Ah, sorry, omma. I thought you’d already left… Good morning,” he mumbled.

She chuckled softly. “It’s Saturday, we open later than weekdays.” A small smile as she shook her head. “Aigo, you must still be sleepy.”

He turned back to the screen, exhaling slow.

“Yeah, sorry… I’ve just been a bit distracted lately.”

“Mhm.” She stepped closer, her hand warm on his shoulder. “Don’t stress yourself out too much, Gyujin-ah. You’re still young.” A pause, searching for something lighter. “The field trip—you said the beach was beautiful. I’m glad you got to see it, sweetheart. Did you take any pictures?”

He froze. He hadn’t taken a single one. She would’ve loved them; she’d never had the chance to show him that kind of life herself.

But

The video—

“There’s a video—there was a lot going on, so I didn’t have time to take pictures, but…”

He pulled out his phone and tapped play. She leaned over the couch, her gaze soft on the screen.

“There’s a starfish right here—it’s not even running when I touch it.”

His mother’s smile curled warm, a quiet laugh slipping out as the clip played.

“I’m always normal.”

That’s when Gyujin’s breath caught. Fingers fumbled. He stopped the video before the next words could spill.

“The—uh—the video ends there. He dropped his phone.”

She didn’t press the obvious lie. Her lips pressed together, a long breath slipping from her nose as she straightened.

“I haven’t seen you smile like that in so long.”

Her eyes shone faintly as she brushed a fingertip across her cheek, a small, almost shy smile surfacing. “This new friend… his words are quite—” She let out a light laugh through the

glassiness. “I’m just glad someone can make you feel like yourself again.”

Gyujin went still. Her words coiled tight around him, biting deep. His chest constricted.

...Like myself again?

That wasn’t what Seongjun made him feel.

Most of the time it felt like being trapped—yet some part of it pulled, magnetic and shapeless. Maybe that was why it was easy to stay. Because it was nothing. Because it didn’t ask for any “why’s” or need any explanations.

Because it was everything.

His mother’s gentle fingers slid through his hair, tucking a strand behind his ear. He stiffened. She sensed it immediately and eased back, patient.

“I’m off to the restaurant. Have fun with your silly game, Gyujin-ah. I’ll see you later, hm?”

A slow nod. A small, automatic smile.

He returned it as she left, the door clicking shut behind her. Only the soft loop of the game’s pause screen remained.

“…She really thinks Seongjun is some sort of angel,” he muttered, a short half-laugh breaking the quiet, clicking the unpause button on the game. “It’s for the best, I guess.”

★ ☆

“WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER.”

“Carried the whole team,” Gyujin muttered under his breath, eyes fixed on the victory screen.

“…again.” His grip on the controller tightened until the plastic creaked. Then he tossed it aside, a long, breathy sigh slipping out of him.

It was probably his 30th game in a row. Every few rounds, he’d check his phone — half hoping for a message, half dreading one. Half waiting for someone he shouldn’t be waiting for.

He never really enjoyed when Seongjun texted him. Even in plain words, he could hear that smug, mocking tone underneath, like Seongjun’s voice had found a way to live inside his head.

The last message had been different, though — that video attached to the stupid comment had almost almost made him feel... lighter. He hadn’t replied. He had just stared at it, unsure why

it made him feel better, or how someone like Seongjun could.

But now, after what happened over the past few weeks, the quiet felt worse.

Feeling Seongjun's absence because he got used to his presence.

Somehow Gyujin being in his own house, was so peaceful that it felt weird.

His thumb hovered above the keyboard. A beat too long. Then he exhaled and typed anyway.

[me]
Are you ma

He froze before finishing.

A message blinked onto the screen.

[crazy bastard]
Outside
(5:48 pm)

Gyujin's pulse stuttered. His eyes flicked toward the front door.

Outside…?

[me]
my house?
(5:49 pm)

[crazy bastard]
Obviously idiot
(5:49 pm)

[crazy bastard]
Come out now unless u wanna give me a house tour
(5:50 pm)

"The fuck…" Gyujin mumbled, staring at the door again. He shoved his phone into his hoodie pocket and stood, every step feeling like it carried a dare.

His hand hovered on the door handle. He took a slow breath and turned it. The lock clicked open.

And there he was.

Seongjun leaned against the rusted rail of the narrow walkway like he owned it — cigarette balanced between his fingers, smoke curling from his lips in lazy ribbons. His gaze lifted, cutting through the dim light, and their eyes met.

Then Seongjun flicked the cigarette to the ground, the small ember dying as he tilted his head, smirking.

“That was faster than I expected.”

The door clicked shut behind Gyujin as he stepped out. “…Why are you here?”

The taller boy scoffed softly, eyes sliding to the side before snapping back with that same bored glare.

“Real nice way of saying you missed me.” He pushed himself off the railing, every movement unhurried. “I saw you typing before I texted.”

Gyujin blinked, barely forming a reply before Seongjun’s hand closed around his wrist — fast, firm.

“Wait—”

The word never came out. Seongjun was already dragging him down the walkway.

Gyujin’s eyes dropped to where their skin met. His breath stilled when he noticed the reddish bruises blooming across Seongjun’s knuckles.

...Why are his hands like that?

Something twisted in his chest. He should pull away. *He knew it.* Something about this wasn’t right.

He tugged lightly, a small attempt — but Seongjun’s grip only tightened, yanking his wrist back into place hard enough to make him stumble. A startled sound broke out of him before he could stop it.

Seongjun glanced back, a small, crooked laugh escaping him, low and careless. He didn’t slow down. Just kept walking, dragging Gyujin along behind him like it was

nothing.

★ ☆

The sun bled into a dark, heavy orange above them, the sky smearing warmth over the rooftops. The neighborhood hummed with low chatter, distant laughter threading through the air.

Seongjun had let go of his wrist the second they stepped out of the apartment block. They hadn’t exchanged a single word since leaving Gyujin’s front door—just Seongjun’s occasional glance over his shoulder, like he was making sure Gyujin wouldn’t vanish if he looked away too long.

The walk dragged in silence until Seongjun finally turned his head, catching Gyujin already staring at him. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second before Gyujin dropped his gaze to the pavement, too quick.

The corner of Seongjun's mouth twitched. He rolled his eyes, shoulders relaxing in a lazy motion.

"If you want to say something, just say it. Words die in your throat before you even get a damn thing out."

Gyujin's fingers fidgeted at the bottom hem of his hoodie before he looked up again.

"How do you know where I live?"

His voice lacing with uncertainty, as if the question itself was something dangerous. He'd never told Seongjun. Yet somehow, the boy had shown up at his doorstep days earlier, handing his mom Gyujin's phone like it was nothing.

Seongjun raised his brows, head tilting slightly. Then, with unhurried movements, he slipped his phone from his pocket, unlocking it and tapping through an app.

He held the screen up just enough for Gyujin to see.

Gyujin's steps faltered. His breath caught.

A tracking app.

He dug his own phone out of his hoodie pocket, thumb swiping across the screen. His eyes widened when he saw it.

Seongjun's grin sharpened, a low laugh broke from his chest—mocking, amused at how easily Gyujin unraveled.

"Did you not even fucking notice?"

Gyujin stopped in his tracks, hand shooting out to grab Seongjun's arm and pull him back. The taller boy turned slowly, the movement deliberate.

"…When did you even…" His voice died as Seongjun's grin fell into something colder—a deadpan stare that felt like a threat in itself.

"I told you to get a password, didn't I?"

Seongjun's hand slid down, prying Gyujin's grip off him one finger at a time. His gaze never wavered. Then, with deliberate slowness, he lifted Gyujin's wrist, holding it up between them.

The fading bruise from before—when Seongjun had twisted his arm in front of Woojae—still lingered like a bruise-shaped reminder. Or maybe a warning.

“Don’t cross the line, Gyujin.”

Gyujin’s breath stuttered. He yanked his wrist back, disbelief breaking through his voice in a soft, breathless sound.

I’m the one crossing the line?

He looked away, silent, rubbing at his wrist. Seongjun didn’t flinch. Eyes drifting to something else, his jaw clenched briefly before his arm draped over Gyujin’s shoulders, like nothing had happened.

Gyujin stiffened immediately. Too close. His pulse jumped beneath his skin.

He tried to edge away, but Seongjun’s fingers dug into his shoulder—a silent command to stay put. Confusion flickered across Gyujin’s face.

“We’re in public, Seongjun…” His voice came out as a quiet plea more than a protest, fragile with the kind of fear that hoped to appeal to reason.

Seongjun blinked slowly. Then, without warning, leaned in—close enough that Gyujin froze, caught in the corner of his gaze. For a second, Seongjun just stayed there, studying him from too near. Then he straightened, widening the space between them as abruptly as he’d closed it.

“This isn’t any different from the mall, is it?”

Yes, it was different. So fucking different. Here—people knew him. His mom’s restaurant was just a few blocks away. It wouldn’t take a genius to recognize him.

Before Gyujin could try to pull away again, Seongjun’s hand found his cheek. He turned his face toward the sidewalk with effortless control, fingers warm against cold skin.

“That girl’s been staring at you the whole time.”

Gyujin caught a glimpse of her—a girl sitting at an outdoor table up ahead, phone in hand, eyes unmistakably fixed on them. When she noticed him noticing, she rolled her eyes and looked back down at her screen.

Gyujin slightly laughed, the sound clipped, almost awkward. “I probably wasn’t the one she was looking at.”

“Oh really…” Seongjun drawled, turning his head with deliberate slowness until their eyes met. “Then should I ask her out?”

Gyujin nearly choked on his own breath. “What—?”

Seongjun clicked his tongue, grin spreading as he tightened his arm around Gyujin. “Kidding.”

This time, Gyujin didn't fight him off. He just walked beside him, their steps falling in rhythm.

"Whatever," he muttered under his breath.

"Did that piss you off?" Seongjun asked, eyes cutting to him sideways, a teasing glint breaking through.

"…no." The response came too fast, too defensive. He didn't even look at him.

"Yeah, it did."

"Seriously…" Gyujin trailed off, realizing mid-sentence that he didn't even know where Seongjun was taking him. "where are we going….?"

Seongjun shrugged, dismissive. "How the fuck would I know? You're the one who lives around here. I'm hungry, so pick somewhere. Quickly."

Gyujin glanced at him, lips parting in disbelief. "Are you—you're the one who randomly showed up?"

"Have I ever needed your fucking permission to do anything?" Seongjun's tone wasn't a question—it was a statement of fact.

Gyujin exhaled, quiet. He shook his head, voice softer now. "...the closest place to eat is up there." He pointed down the road ahead of them, his hand steady even though everything else inside him wasn't.

★ ☆

The small restaurant wasn't crowded—but it wasn't empty either. The low hum of clinking plates and clatter filled the space. Gyujin had insisted they sit away from the window. Seongjun didn't bother to ask why.

He dropped into his chair, slouching back with his hands in his pockets, looking like he owned the place. Gyujin followed quietly, fingers tapping an uneven rhythm against the table's edge.

Seongjun's phone buzzed.

He glanced at it, eyes barely flicking to the screen before unlocking, typing something fast, and shoving it back into his pocket. Not even a change in expression.

"Just get two of whatever you're getting," he said, voice low and distracted. "Don't feel like waiting another ten minutes looking through a menu."

Gyujin nodded, calling over the waiter. The man looked too old to still be working—his shirt slightly wrinkled, pen barely clinging to his notepad. He scribbled their order down, then walked off, leaving the pen forgotten on the table.

When the waiter disappeared, Gyujin looked over at Seongjun. He brushed a strand of hair from his eyes, the gesture quiet, hesitant. “Do you have somewhere to be?” His voice came out soft, unsure—like he wasn’t sure he should even be asking.

Seongjun didn’t answer right away. His gaze was somewhere else entirely, half-lidded, idly watching Gyujin’s fingers trace faint shapes over the laminated menu. The smaller boy didn’t notice—until he did, and stopped. His fingers curled into his sleeve like he’d been caught doing something wrong.

Seongjun exhaled, almost to himself. “Yeah. Something like that.”

Gyujin bit at his cheek, muttering a quiet “alright.” The word barely made it out, too low to tell if it meant disappointment or indifference.

If he had somewhere to be, then why the hell would he come here at all?

Seongjun leaned forward suddenly, elbows sliding onto the wooden surface. Then, without warning, his hand wrapped around Gyujin’s wrist. It wasn’t like usual—there was no show of power, no threat in the grip. It was almost… casual. Careful, even. It startled Gyujin, but he didn’t flinch. Didn’t move. Just watched as Seongjun turned his wrist over, pressing the back of it against the table.

“Dainty hands.” Seongjun’s tone was flat, as if he were speaking to himself. His fingers slid lower, circling Gyujin’s wrist—index and thumb meeting loosely, like he was testing its size. “Skinny wrists.”

A quiet scoff slipped from Gyujin, brows furrowing. “Is that…supposed to be a good thing?”

Seongjun’s shoulder lifted lazily. “Don’t know.” He reached for the pen the waiter had left, spinning it once between his fingers. “But you’d probably slip through cuffs from the looks of it.”

The words hit him sideways. Gyujin coughed once, his free hand darting up to cover his mouth—too quick, too defensive. His face flushed pink.

But Seongjun didn’t laugh. He didn’t even smirk. He just uncapped the pen and began to write across Gyujin’s palm, the cool plastic dragging over his skin.

Gyujin’s fingers twitched instinctively, every part of him screaming to pull away—but he didn’t. He stayed still, letting it happen because he knew better than to piss Seongjun off.

When the pen finally stilled, Seongjun tapped his palm lightly with it—a silent command to look.

Gyujin did. His brows knit tighter, disbelief flickering across his face. “Seriously…” he muttered, lifting his hand closer to his eyes.

Seongjun's

The taller boy's hand came back down, wrapping around Gyujin's again, pressing it flat against the table. Only this time, his eyes met Gyujin's—steady, unwavering.

"If cuffs don't work," Seongjun tilted his head, his voice calm, "should I just tie you up?"

Gyujin's breath caught. His face burned hotter, gaze jerking away in every direction but toward him. "...What are you even saying…" His voice came out barely audible, like his throat couldn't decide between fear and disbelief.

Seongjun noticed, of course. He always did. A dry, humorless laugh escaped him. "What?" His hand shot up, grip finding Gyujin's cheeks, fingers pressing just hard enough to tilt his head back and force their eyes to meet. "You're blushing. Do you like that?"

Gyujin tried to turn his head away, eyes flashing with something halfway between defiance and embarrassment. He barely had time to pull back before a voice cut in from behind them.

"Yah. Gyujin? Park Gyujin?"

Gyujin jumped, spinning around. Seongjun's gaze followed, slow and disinterested.

A waitress stood there, maybe in her early twenties. Brown hair tied up in a messy ponytail, a few strands framing her pretty face. She smiled easily as she approached their table.

"You work here too..?" Gyujin mumbled, barely looking at her. His tone made it obvious he wished she'd go away.

"Mhm." She nodded, smile widening as she rested a hand on her hip.

Seongjun's eyes flicked down to her nametag. *"Na Haerin…"* he muttered under his breath.

Her head turned at the sound of his voice, eyebrows lifting in faint surprise.
"Didn't know Gyujin had attractive friends." She leaned forward slightly, extending her hand toward Seongjun, her smile shifting into something practiced and sweet.

For a moment, Seongjun just stared at her. Then his eyes cut toward Gyujin—who was looking anywhere but at them, his hands twisting in his sleeves until the fabric pressed red marks into his skin.

Hes—Is he actually jealous?

The waitress tilted her head when Seongjun didn't answer, giggling softly. "This is usually the part where you tell me your name and shake my hand, y'know?"

He blinked once, then laughed—so obviously fake to Gyujin but Haerin didnt even bat an eye. He raised his hand halfway, fingertips brushing hers before pausing. "By the way," he said, voice quiet but cutting, as he pulled his hand back, "don't smile like that. You look like a whore."

Gyujin's head snapped up. "Seongjun—"

Haerin scoffed, straightening her posture with a sharp flick of her hair. Her expression hardened, though her tone stayed almost too calm. She crouched slightly beside Gyujin, placing a hand on his shoulder, her voice soft enough for only him to hear.

"Stick to Youngdong. This one's broken."

Then she stood, throwing one last sharp glance at Seongjun before walking off.

Seongjun didn't even blink. He leaned back, hands in his pockets again, eyes still locked on Gyujin—who looked one second away from standing and apologizing for something that wasn't his fault.

"Who was that?" Seongjun's voice cut through the noise, flat and sudden.

Gyujin's breath trembled as he exhaled, barely processing the question.

Why the hell did he say that? Is he actually losing his mind?

"…She works a bunch of part-time jobs," he muttered finally. "I see her almost everywhere. I think she's in college or something, but I've never talked to her enough to know."

Seongjun nodded slowly. "Hm. That so?"

Gyujin hesitated, lowering his gaze. "But… you didn't have to say—"

His words trailed off as the waiter returned, setting down two steaming bowls of tteokbokki.

"Fucking finally," Seongjun muttered, grabbing a pair of chopsticks. Then he paused, eyes flicking up to Gyujin. His expression went blank again. "What was that? Before the food came?"

Gyujin swallowed hard, eyes dropping to the table. "Nothing." He picked up his chopsticks, pretending to focus on his food.

Fifteen minutes passed. Neither spoke again. Seongjun finished first, pulling out his phone and scrolling while Gyujin slowly picked through what was left of his bowl.

When Seongjun stood, he tossed some bills onto the table. "Pay the rest and meet me outside. Need a cig."

Gyujin nodded quickly, almost automatically.

As Seongjun made his way toward the door, he passed Haerin again. He slowed for just a second, turning his head enough for his words to find her.

"Meet me outside if you really want that introduction."

Haerin's lips curved into a smirk as she met his gaze, eyes narrowing with amusement. She didn't say a word—just watched him walk out, the door swinging shut behind him.

Outside the restaurant, the lighter flicked alive—its flame brief but sharp in the dim light. Smoke curled into the air as Seongjun leaned back against the wall, one hand in his pocket, eyes half-lidded under the glow of street lamps.

"Underaged smoking… never expected our well-behaved Gyuji-ssi to be friends with someone like you."

Seongjun's gaze shifted lazily to the voice. Haerin was walking toward him, confidence rolling off her like perfume, the kind of practiced assurance that almost annoyed him.

When she stopped in front of him, he flicked his cigarette to the ground and stepped on it, face unreadable. "We're not friends."

Haerin raised a brow, giggling softly, sharp and disbelieving. "Come on. Nobody's buying that. Then what is it? Distant cousins? Secret brother?"

Seongjun tilted his head, unimpressed. "Seriously?"

He looked at her for a moment too long, like he was reconsidering why he was even entertaining this. Then his hand ran through his hair as he exhaled slowly.

"Listen. Gyujin told me you're in college. I'll give you a job—pay double what all your part-times pay in total. You don't have to quit any of them."

Her brows lifted. The sly disbelief on her face deepened as she crossed her arms. "I work six part-times. About ₩400,000 a week. How do you plan on paying more than—"

₩800,000 hit her face mid-sentence. Paper bills fluttered between them before falling to her palms.

"You done?"

Haerin blinked. The weight of the money in her hand suddenly felt real. She counted it in her head, lips parting.

"You're not having me assassinate anyone… right?" Her voice came out with a forced laugh.

Seongjun just rolled his eyes, arms folding loosely.

"Watch Gyujin for me. He said he sees you everywhere. Yeah? All those part-times. He doesn't go far from here other than school, so that's easy. I already know where he is most of the time. I just want you to watch him—and if he's with anyone, absolutely anyone that isn't his mother, text me."

Haerin's expression twisted, uncertain. "Isn't that a little excessive? You sound like an obsessive boyfriend, and he's not even your friend—" She stopped mid-thought, eyes widening. "No way, Gyujin's—"

"It's fine if you don't want to do it," Seongjun cut her off, reaching for the money.

But she pulled her hand back fast. “Hold on—I never said I wouldn’t do it.” She slipped the cash into her pocket and pulled out her phone. “Give me your number so I can text you.”

Money really makes people do anything, huh.

Seongjun typed in his number and handed the phone back.
“Alright. Leave now before Gyujin comes out.”

Haerin turned, half scoff, half laugh, her ponytail tightening as she walked away and disappeared around the corner.

Seconds later, the restaurant door opened. Gyujin stepped out, hoodie tucked over his hands, eyes flicking from Seongjun to the corner where he’d just seen someone turn away.

Seongjun noticed immediately. A curse slipped under his breath. “Yah. Gyujin, come here.”

Gyujin shoved his hands deeper into his hoodie pocket and walked over.

“…were you just talking to someone?”

Seongjun’s eyes flicked down at him, then his hand suddenly came up, fingers threading through Gyujin’s hair before shoving lightly. “Get an eye exam. You’re seeing things.”

Gyujin exhaled through his nose, fixing his hair with a muttered, “Yeah. Whatever,” before turning away.

A slow grin ghosted across Seongjun’s face as he followed. “You’re in a rush.”

Gyujin’s eyes stayed on the pavement. His words came out steady but small. “My mom will be home soon.”

Seongjun stopped mid-step. His hand shot out, grabbing Gyujin’s arm and yanking him back hard enough to make him stumble.

“You’re leaving?”

Gyujin froze when he looked up at that glare. That look Seongjun always had right before something bad.

“...can I..?” The words slipped out before he could think. He shouldn’t have needed to ask, but it came out instinctively anyway.

In a sudden motion, Seongjun’s hand came up, his palm pressing to Gyujin’s cheek. Gyujin tensed, one eye squeezing shut—then opened again when the touch didn’t sting. Seongjun’s thumb traced slow, deliberate circles across his skin.

“No. You can’t.”

Gyujin didn't flinch. Didn't even seem surprised. His jaw tightened, eyes shifting away as he bit down on the inside of his cheek.

Maybe if I asked first, he would've let me.

Seongjun's fingers slid from his face to his hair, combing through the soft strands like he owned the movement.

"Ask me when you want to do something. Ask me before you go anywhere. Ask me before you talk to anyone…" his voice was quiet, dragging, each word deliberate as he brushed Gyujin's bangs from his eyes and gathered them between his fingers, "…don't do anything without my permission."

Gyujin's jaw locked tighter. He only managed a low "okay…", swallowing down everything he wanted to say because any word might just make this worse.

"Also," Seongjun crouched slightly, their eyes level. His smile curved sharp. "I'm not done with you yet for tonight."

That threw Gyujin off. His eyes flicked up, startled. "What…?"

Seongjun's grin deepened. Without another word, he dragged Gyujin toward a sleek car waiting at the curb. The driver didn't even look at them. Of course Seongjun had called ahead. Of course he'd planned it all.

And Gyujin didn't bother questioning it. There were never good answers anyway.

In the car, Gyujin pulled out his phone as soon as the doors closed, fingers hovering over the screen, already typing.

Seongjun tilted his head, leaning closer than necessary, eyes narrowing at the glow of Gyujin's phone.
"Who you texting?"

Gyujin's fingers stilled mid-typing.
"My mom," he said quietly, voice almost swallowed by the car's hum. "I'm telling her I'm with you, so I'll get home late."

The words hung in the air like fraying wire, tense and delicate. For a moment, it almost sounded like they were…some normal couple on a Saturday evening.

Seongjun pulled back first, scoffing dismissively, as if to mask the flicker of unease that had passed between them.

"Why would your parents give a shit about what you do on a Saturday?" His voice slid back into that lazy swagger, a veneer of boredom over the twitch of something sharper.

Gyujin hit send slowly, eyes lifting to meet Seongjun's. "Isn't that…normal? I mean—if their kid wasn't home until late, I think any parent would be worried."

Seongjun tilted his head back, leaning into the seat. “Yeah, I guess that is normal.”

Gyujin’s brows drew together, lips parting slightly in confusion.

Did he just…agree with me?

Then it clicked. Shit.

His parents—

“Seongjun—”
“Gyujin—”

Their voices collided, overlapping, it should’ve been funny—almost light.

Gyujin let out a soft, breathless laugh, while Seongjun simply scoffed.

“Just shut up. I’m going first.” Seongjun’s eyes locked onto Gyujin’s, sharp and unblinking. “See, the tracking shit won’t tell me exactly where you are inside a building. When you’re at school, it just says ‘in the building.’ So…where do you go during lunch?”

The question hit like a dart.

“The cafeteria?” His voice came out uncertain, wavering. Seongjun noticed immediately.

His jaw ticked. “When I can’t find you in the cafeteria, where the fuck are you?”

“Well…” Gyujin started, fingers curling into his lap, “…sometimes I hide out on the rooftop.”

“Ah….hide?” Seongjun’s voice flattened, unreadable. His hand shot out, wrapping around Gyujin’s throat and pulling him forward so fast the air barely caught up. Gyujin gasped, breath breaking.

“You really are a damn pussy, Fuckgyu.”

Seongjun’s voice was warm against Gyujin’s temple, a whisper that should have been threatening but carried a heat far worse. Gyujin felt the tight press of Seongjun’s fingers against his neck, the steady weight of control, and something deeper stirring in his chest. He wish it hurt more. Fear would have been easier. But this—this crawling heat—this was unbearable.

Then, just as abruptly, Seongjun released him.

“Fuck...” Gyujin gasped, curling his fingers into his thighs, shoulders rising and falling with shallow, ragged breaths. He could finally breathe—not because he had been suffocated, but….

Seongjun clicked his tongue, eyes sweeping over him like a predator taking measure.

The hell?

A single finger tilted Gyujin's chin up just enough for him to catch the light glinting off his throat, a casual inspection masquerading as control.

"That was barely shit. Didn't even leave a mark. Why are you—"

"It's nothing," Gyujin cut in, voice too quick, too desperate to escape the scrutiny. His eyes stayed glued to his fingers in his lap, trying to anchor himself. "…Where are we going? You do know this time.....*right?"*

His panicked words only confirmed what Seongjun already knew.

Seongjun rolled his eyes, dismissive, folding his arms with lazy precision. A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Going to some club." He let it hang there like it was no big deal.

Gyujin's eyes widened. "What—how would we—" He exhaled sharply, defeat cracking his tone. "Why didn't you tell me before…?"

Seongjun shrugged, indifferent. "You wouldn't have gotten in the car if I did."

"You would've made me get in either way."

"Pretty much."

Gyujin ran a hand through his hair, inhaling slowly. He'd never even been to a party before. This was…far from anything he wanted.

"Why don't you just go with your friends…?" His voice fell lower, softer.

Seongjun tilted his head, catching Gyujin's gaze—or the desperate avoidance of it. "I am."

Confusion knotted inside Gyujin. "…You're not…talking about me, right?"

A low, sharp laugh cut through the car. Seongjun rolled a shoulder, lazy indifference masking amusement. "Obviously not."

★ ☆

Everything was loud—too many people. The bass thudded deep enough to rattle his chest. Gyujin squinted as they walked in, the flashing lights bleeding color after color across the crowd until his eyes burned. He hadn't even been there ten minutes and already wanted to go home.

Seongjun had gotten past the bouncers like it was nothing. They didn't even question if he was a minor. Maybe they knew him. Or maybe he just had that look—like trouble people were too tired to argue with.

Gyujin figured he probably did this often. It wouldn't be surprising; all the karaoke nights, the smoke-filled hangouts, the friends that always acted too old for their age.

Seongjun's grip had been on Gyujin's wrist the entire time. He only let go when they reached the bar, leaning in to start some pointless small talk with the bartender—a guy barely older than them but already acting like he'd seen too much. Seongjun fit right in, the careless smirk, the rough tone, the too-familiar swagger.

"Yah! Seongjun! Over here!"

A voice cut through the crowd and music. Seongjun didn't even notice. Too busy talking.

Gyujin hesitated, then tapped his shoulder once, pointing toward the voice.

Minhyuk and Jihoon stood a few meters away, waving them down—or maybe just waving Seongjun down, because their faces twisted in surprise when they noticed Gyujin beside him.

Minhyuk squinted, almost like he needed to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

"Fuckgyu actually came!" he yelled through a burst of laughter. "Get us some drinks, motherfucker!"

Jihoon shoved him with an elbow. Minhyuk snapped his head toward him, annoyed, but Jihoon was muttering something low, poking his forehead like he was saying shut the fuck up, dumbass.

Seongjun groaned quietly, the sound of irritation barely audible over the music. "These idiots…" he muttered.

Gyujin shifted awkwardly beside him, feeling like a misplaced shadow. "They knew I was coming?"

Seongjun slid his eyes toward him, leaning lazily against the counter. A short laugh left his mouth, the kind that didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah, no shit they would. You're my—"

"Right, pet."

Gyujin said it quietly, mostly to himself, but even with the noise, Seongjun heard it. The word hit harder than it should've—like a hand closing around something soft in his chest and squeezing until it hurt.

He nodded slowly, tongue pressing against the inside of his cheek. "That what you think this still is?"

Honestly, Gyujin didn't. But he'd never risk saying that. What if he was wrong? What if saying anything made him sound pathetic?
Still, deep down, they both knew it wasn't the same anymore. It hadn't been for a while.

Gyujin's shoulders slumped, eyes lowering. "…That's what you said it was."

Seongjun's jaw tightened.

That wasn't even what I was going to say.

Then he froze. What was he going to say?

None of them knew what they were to each other anymore. Seongjun acted like he did—like he was always the one in control—but half the time, he was just as confused about all this as Gyujin was. He moved on impulse and only questioned it later, when it was too late. When it had already happened.

He'd made the rules. He'd drawn the lines. So why was he the one crossing them now? Why the hell was he here with him on a Saturday night?

It's not like I actually like him. We're just… whatever this is.

And sure, they'd kissed before—but that didn't mean anything. Boys messed around sometimes. It was hormones, confusion, nothing worth a second thought.
So why did it feel like one?

Before he could figure it out, a hand clamped down on his shoulder, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"Scared the shit out of me, fucking moron—what the hell—"

Minhyuk, drunk and flushed, was wobbling against him, one finger raised in triumph.
"That… fucker…" he hiccupped, pointing across the crowd. "…that crazy fucker over there!"

He jabbed his finger toward Jihoon, who barely gave him a look before waving him off with a tired scowl.

Seongjun swatted his hand away, narrowing his eyes, more annoyed than angry. "Jesus man."

Gyujin bit back a laugh, feet swinging from the bar stool as he tried not to stare too long. If he did, he'd burst out laughing, and that'd just make things worse.

Minhyuk's gaze slid to him, squinting hard like he was trying to remember who he was.
"Yah… Fuckgyu…" He waved clumsily, his voice dragging. "You… tell me—did Seongjun fuck you yet or is he—"

“Alright, that’s enough.”
Seongjun’s voice cut sharp through the noise, grabbing Minhyuk by the collar and pulling him back. The movement was easy, practiced, like he’d done it before.

“Order this piece of shit some water,” he tossed over his shoulder.

Gyujin blinked, staring after him with parted lips and furrowed brows.
“Does he just tell them everything?” he muttered under his breath, turning back toward the bartender.

He waited, staring blankly at the drink list while the man finished up with another customer. His head buzzed. The realization hit slowly—how screwed he’d be if his mom ever found out where he was right now.

He wanted to leave. Just vanish into the night.
Finally, the bartender turned his way, sliding the list away from Gyujin.
“You should pay attention to your surroundings in a place like this, kid.”

Gyujin gave a small, awkward laugh, glancing up.

The man twirled the drink list between his fingers, nodding toward Seongjun and the others.
“Friends from college?”

Gyujin blinked, looking over his shoulder. “College…?” he mumbled, before catching himself. “Yeah. Friends from college.”

“Right, right.” The bartender nodded, amused. “I’m in college too. Workin’ part-time.” He studied Gyujin for a moment, grin pulling at his lips. “Never seen you around here before though—but I’ve seen your buddy plenty.”

Yeah. That sounded about right.

“Ah… Seongjun?” Gyujin’s voice came out tight, hesitant, like he was tiptoeing over broken glass.

The bartender chuckled, eyes scanning him briefly. “Loosen up, man,” he said, reaching for a bottle. “But yeah, that dude you came in with. Usually shows up with a buncha’ girls though.” He slid a drink toward Gyujin, smirking. “Thank God it’s you this time, fuckers loud as hell. So this one’s on the house.”

Gyujin stared at the drink. The words bunch of girls echoed in his head longer than he wanted them to but the longer he stared at the drink the further his mind wandered off those words to a different unsavory memory.

That drink. That time. That boy—Taemin.

He exhaled shakily. “Thank you, but water’s fine.”

The bartender raised a brow, laughing under his breath. “Alright, its all good, suit yourself.” He turned to grab a bottle from the fridge. “Sparkling or still?”

“Uh… still, please.” Probably better for a drunk person anyway.

He slid the bottle across the counter with a card machine.

Ah, fuck.

Of course he didn’t have a card on him.

He turned slightly toward Seongjun—but before he could say anything, the machine beeped.

Someone else had already paid.

Gyujin turned back. The man standing there didn’t fit the scene at all—slick black hair, clean suit, looked like he’d just walked out of a boardroom, not a nightclub. Pale skin tinted with flashes of neon.

Gyujin blinked, confusion written all over his face.

The man leaned on the counter, eyes slow and assessing. “Aren’t you too young to be here?”

If Gyujin had learned anything by now, it was better to avoid talking to anyone without Seongjun around. Especially someone like this. The kind that looked at you like they owned the room—and maybe you too. The kind that made Seongjun angry just by existing.

He turned slightly away, eyes on the counter. “You didn’t have to pay for that,” he muttered.

The man smirked, fingers tapping against the surface. His gaze lingered. “Pretty boys shouldn’t be so snappy, you know. Shouldn’t you be thanking me?”

Gyujin bit the inside of his cheek, heat crawling up his neck.

“Pretty boys shouldn’t be so snappy,” huh?

Yeah. He definitely wasn’t thanking him.

But… it’d probably make him leave quicker. He probably just wanted to show off, boost his ego.

He slid his eyes up to the man without moving anything else and muttered a hurried “thanks” before dropping them quickly.

The older man dragged his tongue against his bottom teeth, that same stupid, sly expression twisting on his face.

“Cute,” he said, pointing lazily at Gyujin’s water. “Your drink’s all the way over here. Looks like you’ll have to reach over me to get it, huh?”

Gyujin tilted his head past the man toward the bottle. His eyes narrowed.

“Why is it open—?” The words caught in his throat when the sound of creaking plastic filled the air. The bottle was snatched from the counter by familiar hands—unwelcome, yet strangely relieving.

“Yeah, I really wonder why.”

Seongjun tilted the bottle and let the water spill out, slow and deliberate, soaking the man’s polished leather shoes. The older guy jerked back instantly, face twisting in a snap of shock and rage.

“My bad. My hand slipped,” Seongjun said, tone flat, eyes never moving from the man’s face as he placed the empty bottle back onto the counter with calm precision.

The man scoffed and nodded like he was trying to keep himself together before suddenly grabbing the bottle again and hurling it across the room. It crashed somewhere out of sight.

Gyujin flinched; Seongjun just blinked, following the bottle’s path with a lazy, bored stare.

“Yah. Are you stupid, or do you just have a death wish?” the man spat, clicking his fingers in front of Seongjun’s face.

The corner of Seongjun’s mouth twitched. He let out a humorless scoff, one that sounded more like a warning than a laugh.

“I’ve seriously had enough of this shit today.”

He turned his gaze to the smaller boy. “Gyujin, come here.”

The older man shifted toward Gyujin, head tilting in mock curiosity. “So…” he drawled, eyebrows raised, “you have a boyfriend?” His tone dripped with condescension, like Gyujin owed him an explanation for something that was never his to question.

Gyujin dropped his eyes, sighing. “Does that matter?” He lowered his feet carefully from the stool to the floor and took a few hesitant steps toward Seongjun.

He didn’t even hesitate to do what Seongjun said. Didn’t stop to wonder if it was right, or if it was even his choice anymore. Somewhere along the way, Seongjun’s words had stopped sounding like commands and started echoing as thoughts of his own. Like his mind had been quietly rewritten. What used to feel obsessive now just felt inevitable. Natural.

Because the idea of being apart didn’t even seem real anymore.

The taller boy looked down at him, and before Gyujin could say anything, Seongjun’s hand came up, gripping his jaw and turning his face slightly—examining him like he was checking for damage. Gyujin squinted, a brow twitching upward, but didn’t pull away—just let Seongjun’s fingers move his face however they wanted, waiting for it to be over. When Seongjun seemed satisfied and finally released him, Gyujin huffed a small laugh through his nose, trying to brush off the tension.

Seongjun turned his attention back to the older man, whose fists were already tightening at his sides.

Seongjun blinked once. "Right."

One word, simple and cold, but enough to get under the man's skin. Seongjun wrapped his fingers around Gyujin's arm and turned him toward the crowd. Gyujin didn't resist this time —too crowded, too many eyes, and none of them cared enough to notice.

Behind them, the man scoffed, legs folding back under him. "Of course you just walk away. You kids love to talk shit with no action."

Seongjun stopped mid-step, glancing over his shoulder with that same flat, unimpressed expression.

"I'm letting you off the hook. If you wanna go into cardiac arrest, you're welcome to swing first."

The man went silent. Uneasy, he looked away, muttering something under his breath. Seongjun's smirk stretched lazy and slow as he rolled his eyes, tugging Gyujin toward the booth.

Gyujin really couldn't tell if Seongjun was mad at him or not, so he spoke first—it was safer that way.
"I didn't really say anything to him," he said quickly, then quieter, "he basically called me rude too." The last part came out small, like it actually bothered him.

Seongjun's eyes flicked over to him. His face stayed unreadable. "I know."

Gyujin's pulse steadied.

He's seriously not mad?

"Thanks," Gyujin murmured without looking up, biting his lip right after.

Seongjun rolled his eyes and let go of his arm. "Don't read into it." He dropped into the booth seat, leaning back. "Old fucks being weird with younger guys is just gross." He looked up at Gyujin, gesturing lazily to the seat across from him. "It'd piss anyone off."

Gyujin pressed his lips together and sank into the seat across from him, the circular black table between them feeling like more of a barrier than a divider. "I guess so."

Seongjun slid his half-finished drink toward him. Gyujin eyed it and immediately slid it pushed it back. "I can't—my mom will get mad."

Seongjun picked the bottle back up, taking a slow sip instead.
"Stay at my place tonight then."

Gyujin eyes widened just slightly, clearing his throat against his wrist. “I haven’t drank anything… I can get home fine.”

Seongjun twirled a chopstick between his fingers, then abruptly flicked it at him—sharp enough to make Gyujin flinch. “I wasn’t asking.”

A flash of irritation crossing Gyujins face, glaring back—but the second Seongjun blinked, he dropped his gaze again, retaliation dying in his throat. “Where… are Minhyuk and Jihoon?”

Seongjun didn’t reply immediately. Just stared at him for a long moment, silent.

He always changes the subject when he’s nervous.

Finally, Seongjun’s shoulders shifted, scanning the dance floor before his eyes landed somewhere past the crowd.
“There.” He pointed, slow and unbothered.

Minhyuk and Jihoon were clearly failing miserably. Whatever “conversation” they were having looked more like a bad comedy skit. The girls shared looks, laughed, and walked off. Minhyuk immediately smacked Jihoon in the back of the head, scolding him for ruining their shot—but Jihoon gagged, slapped a hand over his mouth, and both bolted toward the bathrooms.

Seongjun sighed. “Fucking idiots.”

Gyujin huffed quietly through his nose.

His fingers fidgeted over each other before he spoke again. “Can we leave now then? To your house…”

Seongjun’s lips curved. He leaned back, eyes half-lidded. “I guess someone’s eager to get into my bed.”

Gyujin nearly choked on air. “What—? It’s not—” His glare met Seongjun’s smirk for a second before he gave up and looked away. “It’s just crowded, and it’s stressing me out.”

“Right,” Seongjun said flatly, already looking elsewhere. Unimpressed. “Forgot you’re a loser with no friends.”

“I have Youngdo—” Gyujin’s voice trailed off before it could finish. “Nevermind.” The last word came out quiet, stripped of any defense.

Seongjun clenched his jaw, hard.

Youngdong was gone. Erased, like a stain Seongjun had scrubbed out himself. He’d made sure of it—cut clean from Gyujin’s life, severed at the root. But the fact that Gyujin still thought about him—still remembered him—burned under Seongjun’s skin like a quiet insult.

It wasn't jealousy. He didn't see Youngdong as a threat; that was the problem. There was nothing dangerous about him, nothing worth fearing. Just a background noise that refused to fade.

And yet, Gyujin let him linger. Let his name exist in the back of his mind like it mattered. Like Seongjun hadn't already stripped away everything else.

That's what pissed him off—the uselessness of it. The audacity of someone so irrelevant still taking up space where only he should exist. Gyujin didn't need anyone else. He shouldn't even have the capacity to.

Seongjun had carved out every corner of him, filled every silence, rewired every thought. But still, there was that faint echo—proof that he didn't have all of him yet.

And that, more than anything, pissed him off the most.

Seongjun's fingers dug deep into his palms. "You don't need anyone else." His tone wasn't smug anymore. It dropped into something darker.

"I know." Gyujin's voice was small. His fingers picked at each other under the table. "only Seongjun."

Seongjun voided glare faltered. His shoulders lifted, then fell in one long breath, but his eyes stayed fixed on Gyujin.

He didn't have to fucking add that last part.

Seongjun suddenly stood, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Get up. We're leaving."

Gyujin scrambled up and followed quickly, not hesitating at all. Just needed to get out of this place before his ear drums burst.

Outside, the night air felt colder. Gyujin looked over at Seongjun's face—it looked exactly the same as always. Calm. Collected. Even after drinking all night.
"You don't seem drunk."

Seongjun shrugged. "I have a high tolerance."

"Then… what's the point of drinking?"

Seongjun shot him a sidelong glance. "Why are you asking so many fucking questions? You said you didn't want anything."

Gyujin kicked a rock along the pavement. "You're the one who told me to talk more," he mumbled, voice softer now.

"Why the hell did I say that," Seongjun groaned, dragging a hand over his face. "Just shut up like you always do. I have a headache."

So he did. Gyujin just stared at the ground, watching the dirt shift beneath his shoes and the small rocks scatter.

A crash broke somewhere in the distance, followed by the slurred yelling of drunk men arguing.

Seongjun barely turned his head. “Drunk-tards fighting over a damn lighter,” he muttered, snorting.

But Gyujin didn’t reply. Didn’t even look at him.

Seongjun’s head tilted slightly, eyes narrowing. “You ignoring me?”

Gyujin slowly looked up and blinked.

Does he have short-term memory loss?

“You just told me to shut up because you have a headache?”

Seongjun clicked his tongue, rolling his eyes. “So? It’s not that bad.”

Gyujin huffed a quiet breath, halfway between a laugh and disbelief. “Seriously…”

★ ☆

Gyujin didn’t think he’d ever end up here again.

When they stepped inside Seongjun’s house, it hit him all at once—the faint echo of something familiar, heavy, and cold. The place looked exactly as it did the day he left. Untouched, like time hadn’t moved since. Too big for one person, too empty for comfort. Still felt less like a home and more like a hotel room you only ever sleep in.

Seongjun’s room was no different. Everything was still in its place. Gyujin’s eyes drifted to the book sitting on the bedside table—on his side of the bed. The one he used to read when Seongjun was gone for hours at school, just waiting for him to come back.

When Gyujin turned, Seongjun was already rummaging through his wardrobe like nothing about this needed an introduction. Like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Your room is—”

“What?” Seongjun’s voice cut through the quiet, sharp, bored. He turned just enough to catch Gyujin’s eyes. “It’s not like you’ve never been here before.”

Gyujin shifted his socks against the cold floor, gaze sliding back to the nightstand. “I was gonna say it’s still the same as… before.”

Seongjun scoffed, rolling his eyes as he shoved hangers aside. “Obviously. You think I’d do some kind of renovation in a week?”

“Not like that…” Gyujin’s voice softened. “The book I used to read is still—”

“Alright,” Seongjun cut him off, tone flat, as if shutting the thought down before it could go anywhere. Like it wasnt something Gyujin was supposed to notice.

He didn’t even pause before saying, “Take off your pants.”

The words landed like a slap.

Gyujin blinked, his head snapping up. “What…?”

“Take them off.” Seongjun’s tone didn’t change. No teasing, no smile. Just command.

And when Gyujin met his eyes, there was something in them that made refusal feel… impossible. Like it wouldn’t just be disobedience—it’d be betrayal.

So he obeyed. A shaky inhale, fingers tightening at the waistband before pulling the fabric down. The air felt too cold on his legs, heat rising up his neck in contrast.

Seongjun just stared. For a second too long. Then he exhaled sharply through his nose, something close to a laugh.

“You miss puberty or some shit?” His tone turned edged with amusement. “Maybe we should’ve sold pics of your legs instead of the crap you and that friend of yours brought us.”

Gyujin’s mouth parted, searching for a reply that wouldn’t sound pathetic. Nothing came out. His face flushed, he turned his head and he muttered under his breath, *“...shut up.”*

“Geez…” Seongjun drawled, stepping closer. His hand found Gyujin’s jaw, tilting his face up with effortless control. “Is saying dumb shit all this mouth is good for?” His thumb brushed over Gyujin’s lower lip like it was a habit he’d already formed.

Gyujin’s breath caught. Too close. Too much. He stepped back, mumbling into the hem of his shirt, voice muffled and small. “Stop saying stuff like that… it’s not funny…”

But Seongjun didn’t look away.

He wanted to reach for him again—*to see if he’d flinch, or stay still*—but then his phone rang.

The trance broke.

He sighed, pulling the phone out of his pocket. Gyujin glanced up, catching the shift in Seongjun’s face—jaw tight, thumb tapping against the screen like he was holding something back.

Then Seongjun ran a hand through his hair and murmured, “Probably because I’m not joking.”

Before Gyujin could react, a shirt hit him in the face. He flinched, fumbling to catch it.

“Wear that,” Seongjun said, already turning for the door, phone pressed to his ear.

The smaller boy watched him lean against the doorframe, answering the call with that same careless posture.

‘Take off your pants’ ? Seriously.

Gyujin let out a breath through his nose, half-exasperated, half… something else.

Why couldn’t he just say ‘get changed’ like a normal person?

He peeled off his hoodie, tugged the cotton shirt over his head, and slipped on the one Seongjun gave him. It hung off him—too big, too deliberate.

He glanced down, frowning slightly.

Was it always this oversized? Or did Seongjun just like seeing him look small? There cant be this much a difference…

“Are you fucking stupid?”

Gyujin’s head jerked toward the door, but Seongjun wasn’t talking to him. His voice was sharp, directed into the phone.

“Everyone knows your cracked-up dad spends all the money we give him on gambling. He’s the one who stormed in here demanding cash—You think I went looking for him just to break his nose? Seriously, I don’t even know where that asshole lives.”

Gyujin froze. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but Seongjun wasn’t exactly quiet. That tone—he’d only ever heard it aimed at him. Now, it sounded different. Tired. Frustrated.

So that’s why his knuckles were bruised.

Seongjun…did he show up at my house because of this…?

Before he could stop himself, Gyujin moved. The motion felt automatic. He pulled open a drawer, retrieved the first aid kit he remembered from before—the same one Seongjun had used on him.

The argument in the background blurred, Seongjun’s voice spilling words that didn’t belong to Gyujin’s world. He focused on the rustle of bandages, the sterile scent of antiseptic. It was easier than listening.

“Have I ever given a shit about family ties?” Seongjun’s voice cracked with sarcasm. **“Yeah, okay, dearest cousin, if your junkie father comes near my house again, he’ll crawl back with more than a broken nose. That better?”**

He ended the call with a humorless laugh and turned—nearly throwing his phone onto the bed. Gyujin flinched at the sound but didn't move.

Seongjun sank onto the edge of the mattress beside him, arms resting behind him, gaze unreadable.

Gyujin hesitated, then spoke softly, "Does it hurt?"

That made Seongjun glance over. "What?" His eyes darted to the kit, then back to Gyujin. "Did you get hurt at the club? Did someone—"

Gyujin cut him off, wrapping his fingers around Seongjun's hand instead. His touch was light, careful. He lifted it closer, revealing the faint bruises, then dipped a finger into the ointment and spread it gently across his knuckles.

"I noticed when you showed up at my apartment," he murmured, voice steady but quiet. "I'm not gonna ask, but… it'll probably bruise."

The room smelt faintly of disinfectant and lingering cigarette smoke.

Seongjun didn't reply. Couldn't.

No one had ever done something like this for him. Not his parents, not anyone. He'd always been taught to patch himself up—to move on. Yet here Gyujin was, tending to him like it mattered.

Gyujin leaned in, blowing softly over the cold ointment, then eased Seongjun's hand back down to the bed.

Seongjun stared at his fingers. The touch lingered longer than it should've.

"Gyujin."

His voice was low, a quiet edge threading through the single word. Their eyes met.

"You want me to touch you, right?"

Before Gyujin could respond, Seongjun's hands were on him, pushing him down flat against the mattress. The air caught in Gyujin's lungs, eyes went wider as Seongjun hovered over him—his weight, his breath, everything too close again.

Just for a heartbeat, his mind slipped back to the car—to the weight of Seongjun's hand at his throat. It should've felt like a threat. It should've. But somehow….it hadn't.

"…I don't know…" the sound bleeding out like a broken sigh rather than actual words.

Their gazes held for a moment too long, something unreadable tightening the air, before Seongjun leaned down—close enough for Gyujin to feel the words graze his lips, deliberate and low. "You don't know anything, do you?"

He leaned in, and their mouths met in a quick, fluid motion, Gyujin moved as though every fiber of him had been trained to follow Seongjun’s lead.

The kiss began slow, almost deceptively careful. Seongjun was holding back—and it was honestly worse than if he'd just been rough with him—as if he was savoring every second of Gyujin's surrender.

Seongjun pressed his palm against the bed right beside Gyujin's head, Gyujin's small fingers curling tighter into Seongjun's shirt, clinging like he couldn't help himself.

But that softness couldn't last long—it deepened into something desperate, needy, as if they were consuming each other piece by piece.

Gyujin's breath caught in a soft whimper every time Seongjun's fingers dug into his jaw, forcing his face exactly where he wanted it to be. To Seongjun those little noises sounded like invitation—like Gyujin was nothing but his.

Begging to be controlled, pinned down, broken apart under his hands, used for his every want and need. Seongjun craved to own him completely.

Just then Seongjun pulled back, a needy sound slid out of the smaller boys lips. Seongjun paused, gaze fixed on Gyujin for a beat too long, more so the utter mess he was in beneath.

His usually neat hair was a disheveled ruin, strands loosely falling loosely into his half-lidded eyes, his flushed face, lashes seeming longer with moisture, a small thread of saliva glistening at the corner of his mouth.

“With the way you look right now you’d think you just sucked my dick” Seongjun breathed out, sarcasm threading through, like this was just a game he was playing because he felt like it.

Gyujin tilted his head slightly as his cheeks burned hotter. “its…its not like you havent seen…”

“Right”

Gyujin’s half-formed words were swallowed by a sudden, small yelp when Seongjun wrapped an arm around his waist and scooped him onto his lap in a single, unhesitating motion, tilting the smaller boy’s chin just slightly, forcing their eyes to connect.

“Im the only one who ever will”

He swallowed hard. For a moment he wanted push off, tell Seongjun he isnt a claim or property to be owned, but... there's something in Seongjun’s eyes that makes him falter. He drops his gaze, voice a mere whisper with a small nod. "…yes.”

Gyujin flinched slightly as Seongjun abruptly dipped his head onto the smaller boy’s shoulder, the faint, familiar scent of shampoo right below the side of his jaw.

Seongjun’s let out one heavy exhale against the fabric.

Gyujin was pressed tight against his lap, the oversized shirt riding up the smaller boy's pale thighs, off one shoulder—his hair, his face, all a disheveled mess.

If Gyujin shifted even a centimeter further up his lap, every last thread of his restraint would undoubtedly snap.

"You look so much smaller in my clothes," he sighed with almost contempt "makes me want to break you even more."

Gyujins body tensed up, the air felt hotter, his fingers shifted restlessly at his sides "… you can… i…" Gyujin paused, his own voice sounding like betrayal, he should've stopped there. "… i can take it.."

Seongjun stilled for a beat, then a sudden scoff against the fabric of the shirt made Gyujin's pulse stutter in his throat.

Seongjun slowly met the smaller boys gaze again, a gaze that kept trying to drift away from his.

"That was pretty cute." And suddenly Gyujin's body tensed as a larger hand slid up his shirt. Fingers pressing warm against his skin. But then—

"But seriously, do you think i need permission to touch whats mine?"

Seongjun's hand moved quick, the shirt was slid over Gyujin's head in a blink, his hair falling down onto his eyes in strands.

"Do you still not get it?" Seongjun's fingers pressed hard into Gyujin's ribs making him wince, squeezing an eye shut, while he ran careful fingers over Gyujin's cheek—the gentleness of it mocking the hard press on his rib.

Seongjun lifted Gyujin like he was nothing in a sudden quick movement, Gyujin's back landed against the soft mattress. His fingers dug into the sheets, elbows pressed against the fabric.

Seongjun sprawled above him, knee pressed between his thighs, palm at his side. Eyes sharper—that previous gentleness gone.

"Maybe i went too easy on you," Seongjun pressed Gyujin further into the mattress leaning down closer, words ghosting Gyujin's skin "do i have to remind you?"

Gyujin barely had time to gather composer before teeth dug into the curve of his throat. The sting drew a short, fractured sound from him, his fingers curling in tight into his palms, nails digging into his skin.

The next came just as sharp, and the next —Gyujin bit down hard, holding the sounds in his throat until it burned.

It was overwhelming, he almost wanted to shove Seongjun away—but just then the taller finally pulled back and straightened.

Gyujin let out a long, shuddering exhale, his body trembling. Each mark carried a burning sting. His lip felt almost bruised from how hard he'd been biting down.

And Seongjun—he didnt even blink, his eyes fixed on the marks like they were a silent reminder of where Gyujin belonged, fingers tracing reddened marks while his other hand slid up Gyujin's bare skin.

The tracing stopped.

"Your skins so damn sensitive, fuck, no wonder you bruise so easily."

Gyujin tried not to look at Seongjun as he breathed slowly in and out, trying his all to ignore the sensation that urged him to listen and obey every single thing Seongjun wanted from the boy.

"That's… your fault…" Gyujin whispered to the side, trying his best for his voice to come out steady.

Next thing Gyujin knew, his hands were pinned above his head. The smaller boy flinched, the reaction more instinct than thought, a faint tremor running through his fingers.

"Ah? … that's true, huh." Seongjun ran a thumb over Gyujin's bottom lip. "Well, bear with it."

Seongjun leaned down again, suddenly his lips were on him as if they never left. He pinned Gyujin down with a firm hold against his wrists, as if he thought Gyujin might simply vanish if he let go.

Gyujin let out soft muffled noises he didn't mean to make into the kiss every time Seongjun tightened his grip on his wrists. Seongjun's free hand now rested around Gyujin's throat. He just…

Seongjun pulled back, not too far, just for the need to breathe, they both stared at each other with those same lidded eyes. Seongjun's hands still holding him down with effortless ease.

"Do you get it now, Gyujin?" His voice warm against Gyujin cheek.

Seongjun's fingers suddenly tightened around Gyujin's neck, panic rose, too tight—

Not again—

"Do you understand the position you're in?"Gyujin swore Seongjun smiled when he started squirming. His fingers digging in just slightly—just enough to make sure Gyujin felt it. "Do you understand who owns you?"

Gyujin couldn't figure how someone could be this possessive over a person they weren't even dating—if liking had anything to even do with it.

And just like at the beach, he could barely breathe.

“*…cant… too hard..”* Gyujin’s voice turned into a choked gasp for air. He jerked his head to the side, twisting helplessly under Seongjun; Unable to move, unable to pry Seong-jun’s fingers from his throat all with his wrists pinned above him.

Seongjun didn’t budge, only watched Gyujin squirm underneath him, so helpless. So damn cute.

“Say it.”

Gyujin closed his eyes, as if it could steady him, even as panic curled tight in his chest and his breaths coming short and shallow. His sense of self-worth was unraveling, thread by thread.

“…i belong to… seongjun—you own me, always…”

The admission came out in shaken words that hurt him to even muster.

Seongjun's grip tightened for a heartbeat, cutting off just enough air to make Gyujin's world narrow. Then, as suddenly, it eased, fingers loosening.

“Good boy.”

Gyujin gasped like he was drowned, his body twisting the side and trembling fingers feathering his throat like it would help the air catch up to him.

His heartbeat faltered when Seongjun’s fingers wove through his hair, soft, deliberate—like a hand meant to soothe, not the one that had unraveled him moments ago.

Gyujin’s eyes drifted back to him, the small easing of his posture trailing naturally behind the motion, as if the touch itself guided him.

When Seongjun saw his face, the corner of his lips twitched. His thumb swiped just underneath the smaller boy’s eye.

“You’re seriously crying? Already?” Seongjun feigning innocence as his thumb swifted gently at a damp cheek.

Gyujin hadn’t even realized his eyes were this watery until he blinked unknowingly letting another tear fall.

His shallow panting slowed only a little but the embarrassment flooded in, not only was he unintentionally crying from just that but he was half naked, completely vulnerable, the taller boy above him was completely clothed, and he was sure Seongjun’s hands left a visible mark on his throat this time.

I definitely… look like a mess right now.

He swallowed hard, “..It’s… it doesn’t matter” he said finally, although it might as well have been a mumble under his breath, wiping at his cheek with a shaky hand.

“You’re right.” Seongjun’s fingers still wiping away every tear that fell. “I should make you cry a bit more, shouldn’t I?” tone unsettling calm.

Gyujin stilled

...what is he talking—-oh.

It clicked.

Gyujin’s chest rose in a shaky, long inhale, eyes drifting to the side.

“...just...” His voice trembled before he managed to steady it, starting again. *“...just be gentle”*

Seongjun’s fingers stilled in Gyujins hair. Not a pause of surprise, but because he was biting down a scoff.

Gentle? Who does he think i am?

But instead he just bunched Gyujin’s fringe into his fingers, leaning down to press an unusually soft kiss on Gyujin’s forehead, then pulled back and patted Gyujin’s cheek, like one would to a meer pet.

“Whatever you say.”

Gyujin wasn’t trying to run away, not even close. And it seemed as if that—that twisted something in Seongjun, because he moved on faster than Gyujin thought he would.

He winced when Seongjun effortlessly pulled his remaining underwear down, and Seongjun’s eyes glistened with something Gyujin couldn’t, no, didn’t want to name.

So he actually is a guy.

“Seriously starting to think you skipped out on puberty,” Seongjun scoffed as he raised a brow at Gyujin. “Is your head actually the only place you have hair?”

Gyujin brought his wrist to his face, sliding his eyes away, “shut up…” muttering softly against flushed heat.

“You know..” Seongjun ignored him completely leaning down just slightly, his finger grazing below Gyujin’s eye again. “…it would’ve been better if i could used your tears… but you’re not fucking crying enough.”

He shifted his finger to press against Gyujin’s bottom lip. “So… suck.”

Gyujin flickered his eyes down at the finger on his lip, hesitating, needing just a moment to... breathe.

But he made the mistake of parting his lips slightly, and Seongjun wasted no time shoving his finger into Gyujin’s mouth.

“You remember don’t you?”

Drool slicked past Gyujin’s lips as Seongjun added a second finger past his teeth, saliva coating the digits as Seongjun pushed deeper into his throat, fingers pressing against Gyujin’s tongue. Although…

…it wasn't as difficult as last time.

Maybe Seongjun was actually being gentle.

It would be better to believe that, than the unsettling thought that Gyujin had actually just gotten used to it.

After what felt like forever, the fingers slipped out of Gyujin’s mouth, leaving a strand of glistening saliva that made him internally cringe. Everything felt suddenly real now. This was actually happening.

“You’ve actually gotten better at this” Seongjun leaned back up, but his tone sounded nothing close to praise. “You been practicing on someone else?”

Confusion flickered over Gyujin’s face as he wiped the drool from his mouth with the back of his palm. “What…? no…”

Seongjun just clicked his tongue, a sign he didn’t believe that for a second, then brought his fingers down. “We’ll see about that.”

What the hell is he even sayin—

Gyujin gasped, squeezing his eyes shut. Seongjun slid a single finger in with zero warning.

“I guess you actually still are a virgin.” Seongjun spoke so casually, like this was just a necessary task, slipping another slick finger inside of the smaller boy. “Geez, you’re really tight Gyujin. It’ll probably be hard not to rip you apart.”

“…w-wait, slow… I…” Gyujin tried but Seongjun’s words and touch made him whimperer and whine in discomfort when he felt the foreign feeling invade his body, the feeling strange and unfamiliar to him.

Haa… I feel so strange…

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” The taller boy murmured, as he moved in irregular motions to find the spot that would make him tremble and cry like a little boy, “You said I could do what i wanted to you, and you could take it.”

Seongjun froze when Gyujin suddenly gasped and moaned. Louder, high pitched.

Gyujin’s whole body twitched and jolted when Seongjun’s fingers pressed a certain spot inside him.

Gyujin didn't even think he could've ever sounded like *that.* Borderline pornographic, lewd beyond the noises he made kissing.

He didn't understand it, sure, he had somewhat of how sex usually worked between guys. But he didn't understand, one bit, why he felt like this. Why his body suddenly felt hotter, weaker and strange within a second of Seongjun's fingers pressing against that spot.

"Shit." Seongjun stalled, momentarily stunned.

"That was hot."

But he moved on fast, pushing deeper, into Gyujin—It was too much. Scattering Gyujin's thoughts; he instinctively tried to squeeze his legs shut. "Wait, please…. ha… s-seongjun…"

Seongjun was faster, looking completely unaffected. He grabbed Gyujin's thigh, clamping it in place, holding him still.

"Stop fucking moving" with that, Seongjun pushes the fingers further.

It hurt, as if his other sensations got turned off, focusing only on the burning discomfort in the lower area.

He hadn't even realized that his own cock was leaking.

Leaking from just Seongjun's fingers alone. Too fast, too—

"…hurts… it-it hurts…" the words were so quiet, all he could manage through clipped pants and constant hitches of breath.

Surprisingly, Seongjun actually paused.

"Does it?" Seongjun drawled, eyes locked on the smaller boy as he removed his fingers and unzipped his pants.

Seongjun positioned his erection against Gyujin's hole. "Well, it won't hurt for me. I don't really care either way, but if you don't want it to, bite down."

Gyujin's eyes flicked down in an instant, making the boy whimper and almost hyperventilate a bit.

"Are you… you can't put it inside…you—it wont fit in me…I'll… really…"

Before his words even fully formed—without a single warning, Seongjun pushed his cock, all the way in. Hitting that certain spot with deliberate force.

Gyujin cried out and jerked his head to the side, fingers digging harshly into the sheets, his entire body shuddering, betraying him completely and...

He actually came.

He came. Just from a single thrust.

“Doesn’t seem like it hurts.” Seongjun whispered, grabbing Gyujin’s waist harshly, pulled him closer to make Gyujin stop his futile squirming.

Like time stuttered—he was already pushing deeper.

Now, Gyujin couldn’t stop the tears from falling, one after another through small wines and clipped pants and needy whimpers with every thrust.

He didn’t want to linger on the realization that the pain started to dull down.
He was starting to get used to it. *It started to feel good.*

Almost imperceptibly, Seongjun noticed, noticed how Gyujin started relaxing, how his body slowly eased.

He tilted his head—catching just how much of a mess Gyujin actually was.

“Like it?” Seongjun bowed slightly, fingers grazing Gyujin’s teary flushed face.
Unintentionally pushing into Gyujin further, making him whine, but Seongjun didn’t seem to care. Not really.

“You look *so fucking pretty* when you cry.”

Gyujin’s damp lashes barely just fluttered open at Seongjun, eyes glassy eyes, confusion flickering over him.

Pretty…?

That was probably the first actual compliment Seongjun had given him. And out of *all situations,* it had to be like *this.*

The grip on his waist tightened, sudden and unreal, pulling him closer as if he were nothing more than a fragile doll.

Gyujin didn’t know how Seongjun could’ve possibly gone deeper than he already was.

His voice betraying him, he moaned again.

High pitched. Pathetic—*but it was worse time.*

“s-seongjun…”

Seongjun didn’t falter, but he raised a brow at Gyujin, as if he needed to be absolutely sure he heard that right.

“You stopped squeezing me as much, feels good, hm?” Seongjun moved his fingers to graze against Gyujin’s lower abdomen. “Right here?” Just then, Seongjun suddenly pressed—*hard* —right into the spot his fingers had been grazing against.

Gyujin gasped and let out a clipped sob, squeezing his eyes shut tight. The sudden movement felt as if his insides were burning up, sending a mix of sudden pain and heat through his entire body.

“Probably because I can see myself inside of you.” Seongjun snickered and pulled Gyujin’s legs open a bit more in a bruising grip.

Gyujin didn’t answer, couldn’t. His body wouldn’t stop squirming and trembling now, the feeling of Seongjun pressing into that spot brought such a weird feeling over the smaller boy’s body and Seongjun really wasn’t slowing down.

“Stop it.” Seongjun whispered moments before Gyujin’s head snapped to the side. The slap came with force harsh enough to bruise to make Gyujin stop squirming once again.

“You wanted this, right? Stop fucking moving, you wanted me to use you how ever i wanted to.”

Gyujin squinted an eye, but the growing heat in his lower stomach burned hotter than the pain in his cheek and something snapped within him.

“Not like this…” Gyujin’s voice was small and reluctant, refusing to meet Seongjun’s eyes.

“…more…” his words were woven a shaken breath, “please, ha… can I, please… I need to touch there…please...”

Seogjun faltered, and he blinked.

Not exactly the answer i was expecting, but..

He laughed.

An actual laugh, as if he found that absolutely, ridiculously funny.

“You sound like a fucking whore.”

Seongjun sighed like it exhausted him. Pulled out and leaned forward to grab his own school tie from his nightstand.

“You’re begging. It’s actually pretty cute.”

He caught Gyujin’s wrist in a blink wrapping the tie around his trembling hands. Gyujin’s eyes went wider, his breath stuttering.

“But it doesn’t really work like that.”

He tightened the fabric around the smaller boy’s wrists, tight enough it felt like it would cut through his skin, and tied it equally as tightly to the head of his bedframe.

“…No, w-wait-“
Gyujin’s voice was barely audible, his heart was racing, he tugged lightly on the tie. Nothing.

He was completely restrained.

Seongjun's eyes wandered over the smaller boy beneath him, up and down, as if he was gazing at a piece of art he had created.

He ran fingers through Gyujin's hair, feeling just how much he was trembling, and laid a strangely soft kiss on Gyujin's cheek, then pulled back up just as suddenly.

"I'm the only one who gets to make you cum, got it?" Something in his tone changed, edged a dark demand Gyujin couldn't name.

Seongjun pushed into him once more. Gyujin had to bite down—*hard*—onto his bottom lip to stop himself from actually screaming.

Seongjun only raised a brow and then the shift was immediate—the kind of change he felt before he understood it.

Every. single. thrust, without fail, managed to hit that spot inside of Gyujin at a merciless non-stop pace.

He was sure he was crying again, he couldn't tell anymore, making desperate whines through the tears he never liked giving the taller boy.

Everything was way too intense. His body jerking with every thrust, Seongjun gripping his waist every time he'd squirm a bit too much, the cutting feeling of the restrains on his wrists.

It felt like was being used.

He felt powerless and pathetic, like he was nothing more than a toy to Seongjun...he was his possession and nothing more.

It was overwhelming. His body shuddered and with a louder, higher whimper, once again... *he came.*

All over his lower stomach. He came. For the second time. He couldn't look down; he knew he looked like a complete mess.

"What did i tell you?" Seongjun breathed out, pulling Gyujin closer gripping his waist tighter. "Now, quit squirming, I'm almost finished."

"Seongjun, please I can't…" the smaller boy pleaded, voice cracking with a small whine, his voice sounded more like an exhausted sigh.
"…i cant take it anymore… i'll… i'm gonna… pass out…"

"Hey, hey, Gyujin," Seongjun's palm tapped Gyujin's cheek as if it would snap him back to consciousness. "Fuck, you still there?"

Gyujin nodded once. A small noise left him, soft and reluctant. Still, some sort of confirmation that he was still conscious, could still feel Seongjun's every movement.

Seongjun let out a quiet huff, something that almost sounded like relief — like he'd actually been worried for a second.

"Good, don't pass out yet." then he once again pushed further, like the interruption hadn't mattered, still thrusting into that spot every single time.

"I wanna see you crying as i cum, just take it for a bit longer."

Yeah, Gyujin said he could take it, but that didn't even seem plausible right now.

See me…crying..? Seongjun…he's…there's seriously something wrong with him…

He couldn't process if it hurt or not anymore. Just the sheer force of it, his wrists tugging, burning against the restraints, his body jerking with every thrust, pants coming in clips and whimpers that he could barely realise he was making.

Suddenly, he could feel Seongjun was about to finish and his eyes went wide immediately, panic surging through.

"Wait—don't do it inside… wait—" Gyujin tried to move back but without a word Seongjun easily pressed him back down against the soft sheets—holding him still, despite Gyujin's weak efforts.

The smaller boy whined and suddenly felt a wet feeling inside of him. His hands tugged desperately on the tie above him before everything finally drifted into a blur.

"…You're a fucking guy, what does it matter," the words came in a breath as Seongjun pulled out. Straightened back on his heels and zipped up his pants, glancing over at Gyujin and—

"Ah, shit, when the hell did he pass out?" Muttering lowly, eyes wandering over the smaller boy.

Don't really want cum all over my sheets.

He stood off the bed, untying Gyujin's wrists, then scooped him up bridal style. Gyujin let out a soft, tired breath against Seongjun's shirt.

Seongjun rolled his eyes, internally scoffing at the boy in his arms as he made his way to his bathroom.

"Don't just say you can take it if you cant, Jesus." He muttered under his breath.

Although, he couldn't help but think Gyujin looked rather peaceful right now. Even in this situation. Always did when he was asleep.

★ ☆

Gyujin felt the warmth of the water against his skin before anything else—soft, steady, almost unreal. His eyes fluttered open slowly, his brain still hazy, lagging behind his body like it couldn't quite catch up. For a second, he didn't even know where he was. The white tile, the faint steam, the scent of Seongjun's soap—that made it all clear.

Then his gaze landed on him.

Seongjun stood against the bathroom wall, arms crossed, eyes locked on him with that same unreadable stillness—like he'd been waiting, patient, just to watch Gyujin come back to consciousness.

"You're awake. Finally."

The last word dragged with a lazy roll of his eyes.

And then it all came back to him.

Gyujin's breath hitched. His eyes squeezed shut—half from embarrassment, half from the violent need to disappear into himself.

I seriously… with Seongjun. Seongjun.

It wasn't regret, not exactly. Just disbelief. Like his mind couldn't process what his body already knew.

He tried to bring his knees up to his chest—*instinct, protection*—but pain caught him mid-motion. A quiet noise escaped between his teeth as every nerve seemed to light up at once.

Seongjun raised a brow, a short huff of laughter pushing from his nose as he stepped off the wall. He crouched beside the bathtub, elbows resting on his knees, amusement curling at the corner of his mouth.

"Still hurts?" His tone was flat, taunting, like he already knew the answer but wanted to hear Gyujin say it anyway.

Gyujin shot him a glance from the corner of his eye, wary and small. He knew that tone.

"You…you said you'd be gentle."

"Did I?" Seongjun tilted his head, pretending to think. "That doesn't sound like something I'd say."

His voice dripped with deliberate mockery, and even though his expression stayed calm, the faint smirk tugging at his lips said it all.

Gyujin looked away, muttering under his breath. "Seriously…"

Seongjun tapped the edge of the tub once, then stood. "Well, you're clean now."

Before Gyujin could process the words, Seongjun's hands were already on him—sudden, firm, lifting him up, bridal style, like it was nothing. Water trailed down his skin, dripping

back into the tub with soft splashes.

Gyujin's eyes widened, his palms weakly pushed against Seongjun's chest as if that could create some distance. It didn't.

"What the hell—"

Seongjun ignored him, placing him carefully onto the closed toilet seat. The movement was almost too gentle to fit his tone. He grabbed a towel, draped it over Gyujin's shoulders, and said evenly, "You can barely move. What makes you think you can stand?"

Heat crawled up Gyujin's neck. He wanted to argue, but the worst part was that Seongjun was right.

"That's your fault…" he murmured, voice low and frayed at the edges.

Seongjun let out a short scoff. "Yeah, no shit. Thanks for the compliment, I guess." His tone was indifferent, but his eyes lingered longer than they should've as he dried Gyujin off, movements quick but strangely careful.

He pulled one of his shirts over Gyujin's head—loose, oversized, drowning him in fabric.

Seongjun just stood there for a moment, staring.

Gyujin looked up, his brows knitting together.
"…What?"

Seongjun blinked, straightened, and patted the smaller boy's head like he was brushing it off.
"Nothing."

Then, just as abruptly, he scooped Gyujin up again.

This time, Gyujin didn't resist. He just let out a quiet exhale and allowed Seongjun to carry him back to the bed.

The moment Gyujin felt the mattress beneath him, his body gave up the last of its strength. Sleep pulled him under almost instantly, exhaustion folding him in without mercy.

Seongjun didn't follow right away.

He sat on the edge of the bed, watching him—Gyujin's breathing shallow, steady; his hair still damp, clinging to his forehead. The rise and fall of his chest was almost too calm for what had just happened.

Seongjun leaned back slightly, eyes tracing the faint curve of Gyujin's face in the dim light.

A sigh slipped out before he could stop it. He looked up at the ceiling, and that's when the realization started to sink in for him too, slow and suffocating.

Shit.
This was going to change everything.

He ran a hand over his face. How the hell did this even happen?

How did the line between them hating each other and unnamed tension blur so gradually into something like this?

Kissing was one thing—stupid, impulsive, forgettable. But this? There was no pretending it didn't happen. And there was no pretending it wouldn't matter.

Because this wasn't a one-time thing. It wasn't like they weren't going to see each other again.

He knew it. They both did.

A tight, unsteady breath escaped him, something that wasn't quite regret but not far from fear either. And fear wasn't something Seongjun ever let himself feel.

Just sleep. Stop thinking. Just—sleep.

And eventually, he did.

★ ☆

The morning light cut through the blinds—too warm, too golden to feel like early morning.

Gyujin's phone buzzed once, then twice. The third time, his eyes barely cracked open, a muffled groan slipping out.
"...Too loud," he muttered, reaching blindly toward the nightstand to shut it off.

His fingers brushed over soft fabric instead of the cold surface of his phone. A quiet exhale left his mouth as he rubbed his eyes.

"…What the hell," he mumbled under his breath.

His phone, normally within reach, felt like miles away. When he tried to turn over, something stopped him — an arm tightening around his waist, holding him firmly in place.

And just as the warmth of that hold registered, so did the memory.

Ah… right. Seongjun.

The realization flickered through his mind right as Seongjun's grip around his waist grew a fraction tighter, as if answering his thoughts.

He always did this in the morning.
Seriously—does he think I can even run away like this…?

The thought was more habit than irritation. That subtle sting of annoyance faded easily, replaced by something quieter when his eyes found Seongjun's face.

He wasn't looking at the same person as before. Not the sharp-edged boy who glared every time Gyujin shifted in his sleep, not the one who muttered *"stop being annoying"* under his breath.

Now his expression was calm. Almost peaceful. His breaths were even, the rise and fall of his chest steady, hair slipping into his eyes with every exhale.

It didn't match the version of Seongjun that everyone saw—or even the one Gyujin usually did.

Gyujin stilled, watching him longer than he meant to. His fingers twitched before gently brushing a few strands of Seongjun's hair aside. He didn't think much of it. Just… quiet instinct.

He really seems like a different person when he's—

"What? You wanna do it again?"

The voice snapped through the stillness like glass.

Gyujin's breath caught. "What—?!"

Seongjun sat up slowly, raking a hand through his messy hair, gaze heavy-lidded but already assessing him. He tilted his head, tone casual in a way that wasn't.

"Is that a no?"

"Obviously—"

Before the word had even left his mouth, Seongjun grabbed his wrist and yanked him closer — effortless, practiced.

Gyujin's breath faltered, stumbling over itself. "Wait—seriously—I'll pass out again—my mom— I have to go home today—"

Seongjun's brows lifted slightly, his tone dipping into that mocking drawl Gyujin had learned to dread. "I'm not really hearing a no."

The words came out slow, deliberate, as he pressed Gyujin back into the sheets, his weight falling closer with the kind of confidence that didn't need permission.

The proximity made Gyujin tilt his head away, his palms pressed weakly against Seongjun's chest, trying to hold him off, the pressure laughably futile.

Is he crazy??

“I already said—?!”

He didn’t get to finish. The doorbell rang.

Seongjun’s eyes flicked toward the door, but he didn’t move. He leaned in closer, ignoring it like the sound didn’t exist.
“You sure?”

Gyujin’s eyes darted toward the door too, his voice tight.
“Did you not… the doorbell just rang—?”

Seongjun scoffed lowly, annoyance in the sound. “So what?”

The doorbell rang again.
And again.

And again — frantic this time, pressing the button like it could break the silence entirely.

Both of them paused, confusion breaking through the haze.

The ringing didn’t stop.

Seongjun finally exhaled sharply, straightening up with a click of his tongue. “Who the hell is ringing my doorbell this damn early in the morning,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

The sudden distance between them felt like air finally returning to the room. Gyujin let out a shaky exhale air as he leaned up on his elbows, muscles still tense.

“I was joking anyway,” Seongjun said, voice lazy again as he rubbed at his eyes. “If you don’t want to, we won’t.” The words came out between a yawn, but something in his tone sounded less mocking this time. Almost human.

Gyujin blinked at him, disbelieving. His fingers ran through his hair absently, trying to fix it, though his expression couldn’t hide it.

Seongjun… is acting… normal?

Just before leaving the room, Seongjun paused in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder. “Plus, your mom would think I broke your legs if you went home like that.”

Gyujin let out something closer to a sigh than a laugh as he reached for his phone. “Yeah… that sounds more like you.”

Seongjun raised a brow, shrugged, and walked out. “It’d be annoying,” he said, tone flat, already back to himself.

Gyujin watched him go, the weight of silence trailing after him. His phone hung loose in his hand.

“Annoying?” he muttered, eyes flicking to his screen. “He wouldn’t be human if he didn’t have some morals, I guess.”

It came out like a joke, but the moment he saw his mother’s notifications, his expression dimmed.

He stared at the date. His thumb brushed the edge of the screen.

“I almost forgot it was that soon,” he whispered, more to himself than anyone else.

He set the phone back down, letting it rest against the nightstand, and watched his feet swing idly over the edge of the bed. The motion was small. Empty.

He stayed like that for a while.

★ ☆

The doorbell ringing could almost amount to a single, long, drawn-out beep at this point—like someone was leaning their entire body weight onto it.

“Actually sounds like there’s a fucking serial killer at my door right now,” he muttered to himself, sarcasm stitched into genuine irritation as he glanced at the clock just as his fingers grazed the door handle.

11:24 AM.

I guess not as early as I thought but…

Seongjun swung the door open.

“Are you trying to break my doorbell—”

He stopped mid-sentence.

Standing on his doorstep was a bizarre little collection of strangers:
a tiny girl who couldn’t have been over ten, arms stretched out aggressively with a tray of neatly wrapped cookies; beside her, an elderly woman who looked like standing upright was a miracle in itself; behind her, a middle-aged man with a smile so practiced it looked like a mask; and to the side—the culprit behind the doorbell massacre—a woman dressed like she was training to become a nun.

A silence hovered for a beat, thick and weird, until Seongjun scoffed and pinched the bridge of his nose, utterly bewildered.

“What the fuck. is this girl scouts and a… friend?” His eyes slid toward the woman with the doorbell finger like knives over glass. “And has it ever crossed your mind that if someone doesn’t answer the doorbell, they might not be home? And you should just fuck off instead of ringing it like an actual maniac?”

The little girl extended the tray even farther—not offering, *insisting.*

“We just moved in next door! We wanna say hi to our new neighbours!” she chirped, grinning wide, proudly showing off the gap of where a tooth used to be.

Seongjun blinked once. Slowly.

“You can’t be serious—” he muttered, but he still took the tray from her rigid little arms because clearly she wasn’t going to retract them.

“Yeah yeah, whatever. Hello. Jesus.” And he was already closing the door—but it stopped halfway with a dull thud.

A hand.
Her hand.

The middle-aged woman had wedged herself in the doorway, her eyes shining with manic enthusiasm.

“Oh goodness. You’re a believer of the lord.” She clasped her hands together as if relieved beyond measure. “Do you know where the nearest church is, dear?”

Seongjun’s expression hollowed out completely.

This is ridiculous.

“Do I look like a GPS to you? Seriously, are you people a church evangelism team?”

The plaster-smile man finally stepped forward, pulling out a booklet with dramatic flourish.

“Oh! Yes, yes, actually. Please be patient as we tell you about the word of the lord.”

Seongjun let out a tired breath and dragged a hand down his face.

“I’m fine. There’s really no need…” His words faded because he heard someone step off the stairs behind him.

He turned.
Immediately.
Like everything the man was saying evaporated from the air.

His hand stayed on the door just as his eyes slid up and down Gyujin—slow, deliberate, assessing.

Gyujin rubbed at one eye, still half asleep. "…What?"

"You're wearing pants now," Seongjun said flatly, and just like that the world behind him stopped existing.

Gyujin choked, coughing into his hand. "Behind you…"

"Oh." Seongjun rolled his eyes like he genuinely *forgot* and the reminder offended him. "Some cultists—girl scouts, I have no fucking idea—"

His sentence cut off when the elderly woman's fading eyes landed on Gyujin.

Her breath *snagged.* Then she released a trembling sound, low and ancient, like some dying hymn crawling out of her bones.

Both boys stared.

Then she lifted her shaking hands near her head, murmur spilling into something frantic and ritualistic.

"You…" the woman rasped, eyes widening impossibly further as her finger trembled in the air. She pointed at Gyujin—then at Seongjun. "If you two stay close…" Her hands fluttered beside her head, frantic. She looked skyward. "One of you will surely *die…!"*

A beat of stunned silence.

Then Gyujin let out a single, startled laugh. Quiet, like it slipped out by mistake. He brought his hand to his face immediately, guilt flickering, and walked toward the kitchen to get himself out of her line of sight.

But Seongjun didn't bother with restraint.
He laughed. Right in their faces.

"Holy shit, are you evangelizers or fortune tellers?"

And he slammed the door shut on their still-rising murmurs.

He walked away from the door like the whole encounter was already being filed under things not worth remembering, eyes drifting toward Gyujin who still looked mildly rattled.

"New neighbors," he said, utterly bored, dropping onto the cushions and pulling out his phone like nothing had happened.

He didn't even glance up before speaking.
"Make me breakfast."

Gyujin didn't flinch. Didn't sigh. Didn't even think of protesting anymore.

He'd almost tried the first time he was here—wondering if he should say something like, *does he think I'm his maid?*

It had stopped being worth the effort a long time ago.

"…okay," he murmured, quiet and automatic, opening the fridge with practiced caution.

★ ☆

They didn't eat in complete silence today.
Seongjun would toss out some offhand comment every now and then—trivial, pointless observations spoken like he was talking just to fill the air—and Gyujin would answer with something barely more than a breath. Short replies, a few real words instead of the usual nod or an "mhm." It wasn't conversation, not really, but it was more than he would have before.

When Seongjun finished, Gyujin hadn't even realized he'd stopped speaking. He hadn't noticed that Seongjun's attention had drifted away from the food entirely.
He was *watching him.*

Why did things suddenly change?
Does this idiot even notice?
Why the hell have neither of us asked a single question about anything?

Before he could think himself out of it, Gyujin did it for him.

Gyujin reached out, placed his last piece of bacon onto Seongjun's plate with his fork, slid the fork back to himself, and took a slow sip of coffee like he hadn't just done something that felt… personal.

Seongjun raised a brow, then let out a short laugh—almost disbelieving.

Gyujin flicked his eyes up at him. "Wha—"

"Nothing."
Seongjun cut him off with a smirk that didn't come close to reaching his eyes. Still, ate the bacon anyway.

What felt like just a few minutes later, Gyujin was already drying off the dishes. His movements were quiet, automatic, hands working while his mind ran in circles. When he turned around, Seongjun was already there, leaning lazily against the pillar that divided the kitchen and living room, arms loose.

He's been…staring at me a lot recently.
And he doesn't even care when I notice.

“Come here.”
Seongjun’s voice was flat, almost bored. Unreadable.

Gyujin’s fingers twitched in his sleeves, curling instinctively, but he obeyed. Walked closer. Step by careful step.

The way Seongjun looked down at him—it was sharp, steady, like he was pinning him to the floor with just his gaze.

He tilted Gyujin’s chin up with one finger. Then he saw it—how something in Gyujin’s eyes wasn’t the same as before.

Gyujin swallowed. His fingers twisted tighter into the hem of his sleeves.

What is he doing…

Then Seongjun leaned down. Slowly. Intentionally. Wordless. Close enough that Gyujin felt his breath ghost over his lips.

For a second, Gyujin’s brain just—stopped.

Then Seongjun pulled back just as suddenly. His hand dropped, and the warmth of his breath disappeared with the space between them.

Gyujin barely had time to process before a fist snapped his head sideways.

The impact cracked through him—loud, jarring.
He hit the floor hard. He barely made a sound—*a choked, strangled gasp*—more instinct than noise, hair falling into his face.

His shoulders rose and fell in a quick, uneven rhythm. He didn’t look up. Didn’t glare back. He just sighed, almost tired.

He hasn’t really… done that in a while.

Seongjun tilted his head at the sight of Gyujin on the ground—pathetic, quiet, not even trying to fight back. He couldn’t tell whether the feeling twisting in him was disdain… or something dangerously close to adoration.

He exhaled sharply.
“Gyujin. Eyes on me.”

Gyujin’s fingers twitched against the cold tile. He hesitated—then slowly lifted his gaze.

And something about him looked… emptied out. Not scared, not defiant, just stripped of fight.

It made something unreadable flicker in Seongjun’s eyes.

Gyujin's voice came out shaky and low.
"…did I—"

"No, you didn't do anything."
Seongjun cut him off instantly, like he already knew where that question was going. He crouched down to Gyujin's level.

He reached out, rough fingers pressing into Gyujin's jaw, tilting it toward the light. Gyujin flinched, breath hitching.

The silence between them felt suffocating.

Then, abruptly, Seongjun's thumb brushed the blood from Gyujin's split lip—and he brought it to his mouth, licking it off without breaking eye contact. Expression still blank.

Gyujin froze.

What—?

When Seongjun touched his face again, it was startlingly soft. His fingers traced Gyujin's cheekbone like he was touching glass.

"You don't really seem as scared of me anymore."

His voice cut through quietly, hand slipping into Gyujin's hair.

Gyujin didn't move until his lashes fluttered down with a breathy exhale.

"Do you want me to be?" His voice wove into the sigh, almost inseparable.

Seongjun leaned just slightly closer, head tilting—then placed a gentle kiss right below Gyujin's eye before pulling back abruptly.

"No. You're annoying when you are."

The best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure he never knows he's in prison.

Before Gyujin could react, hands were already on him. He was lifted—effortless—and slung over Seongjun's shoulder like he weighed nothing.

His heart lurched. His body twisted instinctively—
He remembered this.
The balcony. The lock. The panic.

His pulse spiked.
"W-wait, wait—Seongjun—"

But Seongjun dropped him on the couch instead.
Not the balcony.

A sound close to a relieved sigh escaped Gyujin before he could stop it. He blinked up at him.

“You…could’ve just told me to get up…” he muttered, brushing a strand of hair from his eye.

But just then Seongjun’s earlier words replayed in his head, unsettling him all over again.

Why did he—just to see if i was still scared of him..??

Seongjun only shrugged and walked to the kitchen, pulling an ice pack from the freezer.

Gyujin blinked.

“I seriously don’t get you…” he muttered, lowering his eyes when Seongjun returned, crouching in front Gyujin and tilting his chin up again.

His gaze was sharp, unreadable, but not unkind—at least, not in any way Gyujin could articulate.

“Why would I tell you to get up when you just got hit?”

Gyujin brought his legs up, crossing them on the couch, narrowing his eyes.

“…you’re the one who hit me.”
The disbelief in his tone was almost comical—like he was genuinely asking if Seongjun forgot.

“No shit. That’s why I’m fixing you up. You’re going home later.” He didn’t sound mocking. Just… logical. Like patching Gyujin up was simply cleaning up after himself.

Gyujin winced when the icepack touched his lip but didn’t move away.
“Are you….apologizing?”

Seongjun raised a brow, scoffing.
“If I was apologizing I’d have to be sorry about it.”

Gyujin flicked his eyes sideways, still staying as still as he could.

Yeah. Seongjun would have to be facing death to feel guilty about anything.

They stayed like that for a while. Seongjun kept telling him to stop moving every time Gyujin would twitch or he wouldn’t bother, and Gyujin kept muttering for him not to press so hard.

Until finally Seongjun tossed the ice pack onto the table between the couch and the TV.

“Alright, fuck this. You keep moving”
He dropped onto the couch beside Gyujin, sprawling lazily. The sudden closeness made Gyujin shift against the soft cushion instinctively.

“You kept purposely pressing too hard,” Gyujin muttered, a faint edge of defensiveness threading through his words.

“It wasn’t on purpose.” Seongjun rolled his eyes, reaching for the remote, flicking through Netflix without a glance at him.

“Sure,” Gyujin said reluctantly, picking at his sleeves, avoiding Seongjun’s eyes.

For a while, the room was quiet. Seongjun scrolled aimlessly, Gyujin watched him, the subtle tension between them humming like static electricity.

Then, without preamble, Seongjun spoke.
“You don’t like horrors. What do you like then?”

The question made Gyujin pause. The casualness of it was almost… pressure.
He’d never acted like he cared about what Gyujin liked.

“I don’t know… I don’t watch shows or movies much.” He said finally, tugging a strand of hair behind his ear. “I only really use my TV to play fps games sometimes…”

“You like guns or some shit?” Seongjun muttered, still scrolling, still not looking at him.

“I guess.”

Seongjun finally slid a glance at him from the corner of his eye.

“You must think the whole shit going on with guns coming out of nowhere on the news is cool then.”

Gyujin’s head snapped up.
“Yes—it’s awesome, anyone can get a gun—” He froze mid-sentence, realization catching him. “…Not like… everyone dying.”

Seongjun blinked once.

Then laughed.
And then laughed again, harder, letting it fill the room.

Gyujin looked away, muttering, “It’s not that funny.”

Seongjun wiped his eyes like the laughter actually hit him.
“I seriously wouldn’t be surprised if you actually wanted to kill people. Usually the fucking losers who shoot up their school.”

Then he suddenly dropped himself across Gyujin’s lap—sprawled out, head resting against his crossed legs, looking up at him like this was a perfectly normal position.

Gyujin’s brows knit together, lips parting in confusion. More at the comment than the proximity.

“That…would be—just if someone even thought…something like that, it wouldn’t be normal, right?”

Seongjun reached up and flicked his forehead.
“I could give less of a shit if you did.”

Then he held out his hand, palm open.
“Give me your phone.”

Gyujin didn’t think. He handed it over, mind frozen on Seongjun’s words, the casual weight of them sinking in.

Yeah. Seongjun is probably the only person in the world who wouldn’t care.

Who wouldn’t leave.
Who wouldn’t *let him* leave.

The only one who doesn’t measure his worth by broken pieces. The only one for whom it didn’t matter if Gyujin was cracked or whole—just that he stayed.

‘Only person in the world.’

It clicked too easily.
Every time Seongjun told him he didn’t need anyone else… it almost felt true now.

Gyujin snapped out of it when he heard the PUBG opening music.
His eyes widened.

“Wait, wait—don’t do anything—” He reached for his phone, but Seongjun held it further away. “You’ll fuck up my K/D—Seongjun, seriously, give it back—”

When Gyujin finally snatched it back, he immediately checked his stats.
No changes.

He exhaled sharply, then glared down at Seongjun.

“You cared less about when I texted your mom than that stupid game.”Seongjun laughed through clipped breaths.

“No, it’s not like—” Gyujin’s words trailed off into a groan, caught between relief and embarrassment.

“Yeah, whatever.”Seongjun already dismissing the topic, already bored.

“You smell like me.” He reached up, pinching Gyujin’s nose lightly.

“I know,” Gyujin admitted, resigned, like it had already occurred to him.

Gyujin stared at him—down at Seongjun resting on his lap—his bangs falling forward enough to shadow his eyes. The look lingered a second too long, stretched thin with

something unreadable.

Seongjun blinked back at him, lazy, unbothered. “What—?”

“Why did you take me to that club?” Gyujin blurted, his voice clipping right over Seongjun’s, too quick, too honest.

“Oh?” Seongjun let out a single, dry laugh, flicking his gaze away like the question didn’t land. “That actually wasn’t planned. Minhyuk texted me while we were at that restaurant. Thought it’d be funny to bring an actual loser into a club.”

Gyujin scoffed under his breath—barely there, but sharp. “…Nothing about it was funny.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Seongjun said, tone flat but threaded with that lazy condescension he couldn’t turn off. Then, with the worst timing possible, “You must be a fucking succubus—every guy wants to fuck you.”

Gyujin’s face twisted—real disgust, fast and visceral. Although for a split second, the hypocrisy in the statement was almost laughable, but the thought died just as quickly. Because Seongjun wasn’t just any guy.

The disgust came from the fact he’d been told before that he had softer features than most boys, that his bangs made him look too feminine, that he should cut them. But he had never—*not once*—considered himself attractive enough for anyone to see him as some sex symbol, as something as perverse as a—

“I’m not, that’s… that’s gro—”

He didn’t get to finish.
His phone lit up and began to ring.
His mom.
The sound sliced the moment clean in half.

Gyujin turned it towards Seongjun. He lifted a shoulder with mild indifference. “Pick up.”

Of course, Gyujin did.
“Yes… yes, I’m fine…”

“Ah..yes i'm still at—“

“…Now?”

“Sorry, I know. I’ll be home now.”

He ended the call. The last part came out quieter than he meant to.

Seongjun sat up, brushing his hair back from his face.

“Your mom wants you home?”

Gyujin nodded.

Seongjun pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek and shrugged.
“Then go. She’s been texting you all day.”

Gyujin paused.

How did he—
Right. I just gave him my phone without thinking.

After a few moments, Gyujin changed back into the clothes he’d arrived in. Seongjun had already called a designated driver.

When Gyujin reached the car, Seongjun leaned against the door frame, flicking a lighter on against a cigarette.

Gyujin opened the window and waved him off.
Seongjun only rolled his eyes.

“Fuck off already before your mom calls the cops.”

Gyujin pressed his lips together as he rolled his eyes and closed the window.

Then he was gone.

Seongjun flicked his cigarette to the ground.
The tiny clatter of ash hitting concrete echoed harsher than it should’ve.

★ ☆

Gyujin had never imagined he’d ever need to sneak into his own house before—though he also never thought anything like this weekend would’ve happened in the first place.

In the car on the drive back from Seongjun’s place, he’d caught a faint glimpse of the forming bruise near his lip in the window reflection, the mark where Seongjun’s fist had landed.

The sight made something low in his chest twist, not quite pain, not quite fear—just that uncomfortable reminder that he should’ve seen it coming.

He’d briefly considered asking the designated driver to just drop him off somewhere in the neighborhood so he’d have time to come up with a believable lie. If he walked around for a bit first, maybe he could claim he’d gotten the bruise after leaving Seongjun’s house. But showing up right away? His mom would know it happened while he was with Seongjun. No hiding that.

But he scrapped the plan the moment he realized Seongjun could track exactly where he went. Of course he could. And if he didn't go straight home, if he even tried to stall for a second, Seongjun definitely wouldn't be happy about it.

The idea of deleting that godforsaken tracking app didn't even cross his mind. Not seriously. Not when the consequences of doing something like that felt carved into his bones already. He didn't doubt he'd end up with a broken arm—or worse.

He told himself he didn't want his mother to know because she looked so grateful when she thought Seongjun was some angel-like friend of his. She had smiled in that soft, relieved way, thinking Gyujin had finally made a subtlety nice, normal friend other than Youngdong.

But the truth sat heavy, stubborn, and quiet in the back of his mind. If she found out Seongjun was the one who hurt him, she'd never let Gyujin see him again.

And that thought—landed like a punch in his own stomach. It felt humiliating just to think it.

Now he was standing in front of his apartment door, phone in hand, mind scrambling for an idea to get inside without seeing her just yet.

Then something clicked.

He started typing.

[me]
mom are u home yet? I think i forgot my key
(2:04 PM)

[Mom ^_^]
No honey im still at the restaurant. Do you want me to drop it off?
(2:07 PM)

Gyujin's whole body felt lighter, like someone had loosened a steel band around his ribs. Thank god.

He made himself wait a few minutes—needed to make it look natural, not desperate.

[me]
never mind i just found them, didnt look in my left pocket lol but thank u :)
(2:11 PM)

[me]
im gonna go take a nap idk when I'll wake up so u dont have to make dinner for me, i walked here so im a bit tired
*(*2:11 PM)

Another pause.

[mom ^_^]
Haha ☺ Well then, i'll leave dinner for you in the fridge. Enjoy your nap. Lot's of love.
(2:15 PM)

As soon as she sent it, he slipped inside, quietly shutting the door behind him. He went straight to the cabinet, grabbed the first aid kit, and ducked into his room, making sure the door clicked closed.

He stood in front of the mirror, squinting as he dabbed ointment onto his lip, the sting flaring slightly every time the cotton touched skin. The faint bruising didn't look as bad in the bathroom light. Barely noticeable if you didn't look too closely.

He ran his finger over it once more.

Yeah… it should be fine by tomorrow.

But then he stilled.

His gaze lowered, sliding to just below the collar of his shirt, like it was waiting for him to notice.

Fuck.

He yanked off his hoodie and shirt in one motion, the fabric catching briefly on his shoulder before he tossed them aside, heart stuttering as the cool air hit his skin.

His eyes widened, not dramatically—just enough to show the crack in his composure.

He hadn't checked. Not this morning. Not after waking up in that foggy, uneasy haze at Seongjun's house. He hadn't even thought to.

Now he was staring at scattered marks along his collarbone, trailing up the side of his neck, brushing dangerously close to his throat. Not subtle. Not mild. Intentional.

A map of someone else's possession branded into his skin.

His breath caught, heat flooding his ears.

"….what the hell, Seongjun…" he groaned, dragging his shirt back over his head and collapsing onto his bed.

★ ☆

The next day came like a blink. Monday.

The chaos of the hallways felt almost disturbingly normal compared to everything that had shifted between them.

Students clustered in groups, some standing alone, rifling through lockers, or drifting lazily toward classrooms. Voices carried, too loud or completely drained, textbooks wobbling in hands that didn't feel steady.

Everything around them was the same.

The only thing that had changed was them.

The world didn't stop turning just because something inside them had shifted—they would simply have to fit a new version of themselves into it.

Through the familiar noise, a small group of three students rushed down the hallway, weaving past others with hurried bows each time they bumped into someone. They were headed for the infirmary, panic etched into their movements.

Random, mundane chaos—but then Seongjun remembered.

Those three—the same three who had asked Gyujin for his notes a few weeks ago.

"Fuck, they look so stupid," Minhyuk muttered sharply, elbowing Seongjun in the side as he nodded toward the scrambling trio. Loud, brash, like he couldn't help but announce his thoughts.

Seongjun chuckled softly, tilting his chin upward in a precise, almost imperceptible motion that said nothing but, *look here.*

The three students rushed past—*almost*—until Seongjun subtly extended his foot. Deliberate, measured, cruel.

The first kid yelped as he tripped. The second collided into him immediately. The third managed to catch herself, avoiding a total disaster.

A brief pause swept over the hallway. Eyes turned. Faint laughter rolled across the walls, suppressed but leaking anyway.

Seongjun tilted his head, pretending concern, his brow knitting just enough to sell it.

"Geez. You should really watch where you're going. Someone could get hurt, you know?" The sarcasm was sharp, dripping from each word.

The murmurs of laughter grew louder. Minhyuk and Jihoon weren't exceptions.

Minhyuk laughed loudly, shameless, clapping his hands together. "Hah—shit, you guys planning on decaying there? Whole hallway's staring!"

Jihoon's chuckle followed. The three of them made the group's scramble feel like it was happening exactly as it should—just another part of the hierarchy.

The students scrambled to gather themselves, smoothing uniforms and bowing apologetically, before slipping away through the scattered, amused crowd.

Seongjun pocketed his hands as if the spectacle were beneath him, the hallway's amusement already irrelevant. Minhyuk was still smirking, loud and cocky, clearly savoring the chaos. Jihoon lightly patted Seongjun on the shoulder—an almost casual gesture that immediately snapped Seongjun's attention sideways.

Jihoon raised his hands in mock surrender, chuckling lightly. "I was just gonna say, you seem normal again. You've been acting off for a while, man."

Seongjun clicked his tongue, brushing off the imaginary dust from Jihoon's pat. "And you seem like you still can't keep your hands to yourself."

When Seongjun's gaze shifted forward, he finally noticed him.

Gyujin stood with his hand on the locker, body slightly turned in Seongjun's direction, eyes momentarily fixed on the little chaos he had just caused. There was a flicker of surprise, faint but undeniable.

Seongjun tilted his head, expression flat, eyes narrowing slightly, mouth mouthing a silent *'what?'*

Gyujin's shoulders slumped, and he looked away with a faint roll in his eyes, closing his locker with deliberate care. Under his breath, he muttered, "Unbelievable…" and slipped into the classroom.

★ ☆

The classroom was already almost full by the time the bell rang. Gyujin had slipped into his desk, textbooks stacked lazily, pen tapping against the wood as he rested his chin in his palm.

He glanced to the side—of course, Seongjun's desk was empty. He never bothered coming to class on time. Showed up when he felt like it, or not at all.

Gyujin had always wondered why the teachers never called him out, why they looked the other way through almost all of his misbehavior, why that group of lackeys followed him around like obedient shadows.

Now he guessed. Wealth. Influence. Whatever strings his parents pulled had probably made the school blind. There was no other explanation.

A sharp kick to the back of his chair jolted him upright, yanked him from his thoughts.

He spun around immediately.

Didn’t even need to think about who it was.

“Geez, you look like shit. You even sleep a second last night?” Seongjun drawled, sliding back into the chair with casual boredom, the kind that carried the weight of someone untouchable.

Gyujin blinked, fingers clutching the back of his chair. “It’s Monday at 7 A.M.,” he muttered, glancing at Seongjun’s actual seat, then back to him. “…why are you sitting here again?” His voice dipped lower, hesitant.

Seongjun let a sharp chuckle escape, holding his stare on Gyujin longer than he should. “Do I need your fucking permission to—“

KANG SEONGJUN AND PARK GYUJIN. PLEASE REPORT TO THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE IMMEDIATELY.

The intercom cut him off.

Gyujin went rigid, frozen mid-breath.

Why—why….the both of us?
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What the hell.

Seongjun didn’t flinch. Didn’t even twitch. His face carried annoyance, irritation at the interruption, like it was tedious to him rather than alarming.

He stood, hands sliding into his pockets, and looked down at Gyujin. The smaller boy hadn’t moved. Hadn’t even breathed. Had paused entirely, mind locked in panic.

“You deaf or some shit?” Seongjun snapped, yanking Gyujin upright by the back of his collar. The startled sound that escaped Gyujin was small, involuntary.

Seongjun didn’t hesitate. He dragged him from the classroom like it was nothing, like he knew Gyujin wouldn’t move on his own. Like he was exactly what Seongjun wanted—pliant, frozen, predictable.

★ ☆

When they got to the door, Seongjun let go of Gyujin roughly, and Gyujin just froze, staring at the entrance like it led into some cursed tomb, too rattled to even speak.

Seongjun rolled his eyes and slapped the back of his head. “Get yourself together, fuckin’ hell. It’ll look weirder if you’re tensed up like this.”

Gyujin exhaled heavily and nodded slowly, biting his lip, the tremor of nerves still running under his skin.

Seongjun finally opened the door and—

“Of course it’s this fucker,” he scoffed, flicking his eyes to the side like the mere sight of him was an irritation.

Woojae was seated across from the principal’s desk, arms crossed, tapping his foot with thinly veiled impatience. His glasses caught the light, giving him that sharp, measured gaze he always carried, and he leveled it at Gyujin like Seongjun’s theatrics had skipped his mind entirely.

“Why is Park Gyujin here? Unless my memory has suffered catastrophic failure, I never filed a report that included him.”

The principal’s eyes narrowed at Woojae. “Seo Woojae.” Her voice was flat but cutting, and Gyujin felt a flicker of relief—though he knew that a report didn’t bode anything good.

He shot Woojae a silent, *‘what are you doing?’*

Woojae adjusted his glasses, rolling his eyes. “Did you truly believe I wasn’t serious about submitting an official complaint against this insidious, walking pathology case?”

The principal’s palm thudded against the desk, echoing through the tension in the room.

“Enough hostility. Kang Seongjun, Park Gyujin, please be seated.”

“Really thought I was gonna die of boredom listening to this kid ramble,” Seongjun muttered, sliding into the seat with an easy, lazy arrogance.

Gyujin followed, sinking into the chair like it was a fragile barrier stopping fire and gasoline from colliding, right between Seongjun to his left and Woojae to his right.

The principal clasped her hands on the desk and explained, “To answer your question, Seo Woojae, Park Gyujin is here because, according to the story within your complaint, he was directly on the scene when this incident happened. We need his perspective.”

Gyujin’s pulse stuttered.

What the hell did he tell her?

“Seriously don’t feel like this shit this early in the morning,” Seongjun muttered under his breath.

The principal, either ignoring him or tired of their back-and-forth, cut straight to the point.

“So, Park Gyujin, please explain exactly what happened on the beach that day, every detail you can remember.”

“The b—” A startled cough cut the word short, muffled behind his wrist. “—beach?”

Seongjun's eyes drifted towards him, a brief, sharp curl pulling at the corner of his lips, before he schooled his face again—like Gyujin's panic was the most entertaining thing he'd seen this entire morning.

"Is something funny, Kang Seongjun?" the principal asked, narrowing her eyes.

Seongjun shook his head, demeanor shifting instantly. "Nothing. Everything's fine, ma'am."

Woojae's gaze slid to Gyujin with surgical precision. "Are you… genuinely perturbed because—"

"Nothing happened." Gyujin cut in, voice too fast, eyes snapping to Woojae before dropping in defeat.

Woojae's face drained of patience. Disbelief etched every line. "This is utterly unbelievable."

Then Gyujin froze—not from anything Woojae or the principal said—but because he felt a hand brush his thigh.

His eyes darted down to Seongjun's hand, then back up to Seongjun, who wasn't even looking at him, his expression calm, practiced, perfectly composed for the principal.

Neither the principal nor Woojae seemed to notice…

…especially Woojae.
"For goodness' sake. You're expecting honesty from someone too timid to articulate anything of substance. We're accomplishing nothing by involving him."

"Hey," Seongjun drawled, tilting his head at Woojae and the principal, mock innocence laced through the tone. "That's pretty harsh. Isn't this bullying? Principal…" He glanced down at the plaque like he'd genuinely only just noticed it. "Principal Lim..?"

The insult went straight through Gyujin's brain. Background noise.

His focus was entirely on the slow, deliberate movement of Seongjun's hand, creeping higher up his thigh, oblivious to everything else.

What the fuck. What the fuck. What the—what the hell is he doing.

Gyujin's internal panic went unnoticed.

Woojae's lips parted, disbelief sharp and cutting. "You can't be serious—everyone with functioning cognition knows you're the apex of chaos in this school," he said, voice clipped and precise. Pivoting toward the principal, eyes sharp as scalpels, he added, "Surely, Principal Lim, there has been at least one complaint lodged besides mine? I refuse to believe your administration is entirely blind."

Principal Lim exhaled, pinching the bridge of her nose. "That's exactly it, Seo Woojae. You're the only one who has filed a complaint directly to me against Kang Seongjun. If I had received others, validating this incident would be easier. I had asked other students about this

incident but each claimed nothing of that sort had happened. Which is why we needed Park Gyujin here for his perspective."

Seongjun's gaze flicked to Woojae, a faint, condescending smirk ghosting across his face as the principal continued her explanation.

Gyujin stayed silent, teeth gritted, stomach twisting, until Seongjun's hand paused at his waistband. His own hand darted down instinctively to stop it, fighting not to crack under composure.

Seongjun didn't even glance at him. He jerked Gyujin's hand off like it was nothing, sliding his fingers deliberately under the waistband.

Gyujin snapped upright, panic boiling over.

"Seongjun really didn't do anything. Nothing happened. Principal Lim, you asked other students—it should be fine, right?"

His voice was too fast, too high, almost spilling over with panic barely restrained.

Woojae raised an incredulous brow. "What the hell is wrong with you—"

"See, Principal Lim," Seongjun cut him off, rising to his full height, smooth and deliberate. "I really didn't do anything to him, but if you'd like to continue the report, you can report it straight to my parents. That's what happens when students get out of hand, right? Principal Lim?"

The principal blinked. "Your parents…?" She opened a file, then froze. Pinched her bridge, disbelief etched into her features.

"Seo Woojae, are you insane—" She stopped herself, plastering on a forced smile. "We're sorry for the misunderstanding. There's no need to involve your parents. You may go. Again, Kang Seongjun, my apologies."

She glared at Woojae, who was actually too bewildered to snap back, eyes wide, processing.

Seongjun walked toward the door without a single word of thanks.

The principal finally glanced back at Gyujin. Her acknowledgment was instant and dismissive, as if hierarchy had already erased him from importance.

"Ah. Yes, you too, Park Gyujin. You may leave. Apologies."

Gyujin's scoffed internally.

Unbelievable.

★ ☆

As soon as Gyujin stepped out of the principal's office, he swept his gaze across the hallway —First period had already ended; the halls were filling with students drifting toward their specialized classes, art rooms, labs, music rooms. A normal school morning. Laughs, footsteps, backpacks slung over shoulders.

It felt wrong against the pressure still lodged in his ribs.

He *needed* to talk to Seongjun.
Now.
Before he lost the nerve. Before whatever the hell that was in the principal's office dug deeper under his skin.

Why the hell did he do that right in front of the principal? Did he want them both expelled?

He had never managed to follow the advice Woojae had muttered during the sanctuary field trip.

Test the waters first. See what kind of monstrosity is pacing in his head instead of shouldering it all yourself.

Right now, Gyujin didn't think he'd ever understand Seongjun—why he did the things he did, why his reactions never matched the situation, why everything he touched turned into chaos.

He scanned the hall as he walked back toward homeroom. Still no sight of him.

Maybe it was better if he didn't understand Seongjun. The closer he came to figuring out what went on in Seongjun's mind, the more he lost touch with what should be going on in his own.

Gyujin's steps slowed as he neared the classroom door, scanning the inside before he got close enough for turning away to look weird.

Still no Seongjun.

He let a frustrated breath slip out, barely audible.

I should just go to class.
What would I even say to him?

'Don't put your hand into my pants while we're at school'?

Yeah. As if Seongjun had ever listened to reason. Let alone listened to *him.*

And it wasn't even just "at school." Not in front of a janitor, not in front of a teacher—he'd done it in front of the principal. *The principal.* Of all people.

He's insane. Seongjun is actually ins—

Almost imperceptibly, as soon as Gyujin thought his name, something grabbed the back of his collar and ripped him backward with a startled choke.

His eyes jumped upward—

Seongjun.

It wasn't a correctional tug, not some attempt to snap Gyujin into focus, not even a greeting. He didn't stop walking. He just hooked Gyujin by the collar like he was grabbing his own bag, dragging him down the hallway without breaking stride.

Gyujin stumbled after him, breath stuck in his throat.

Seongjun dragged him all the way into the bathroom and slammed him against the wall. The impact shot up Gyujin's spine, cold tile biting through his uniform, drawing a wince out of him.

Before he could catch his breath, Seongjun fisted a hand in his hair, yanking his head up, forcing him to meet his eyes.

He stared at him for a beat. Long. Silent. Then he let go, pushing him aside like he was done inspecting something useless.

"What do you want?" Seongjun said flatly, like they were discussing homework, not manhandling him into a restroom.

Gyujin tugged at his collar like it had been strangling him—like he could still feel Seongjun's grip around his throat.
"…what do I…? I was—"

"You were looking for me, weren't you?" Seongjun cut him off, one brow lifting with that impatient sharpness. "What? You wanna do it here?"

Gyujin's eyes widened. "N-no—?! That's—that's exactly why I was… looking for you."

Seongjun snorted, amused in the laziest, most condescending way possible.

"Fuck—I was joking. That's actually why you were looking for me?" He grabbed Gyujin's wrist, already pulling. "Alright. If you insist."

Gyujin stumbled forward, pulse tripping.
"Wh—n-no—that's not—" He yanked his wrist back—hard.

"I was looking for you because I wanted to tell you not to do that stuff in school."
The words spilled out—urgent, desperate—like he had to get them out before Seongjun dragged him into something worse.

Seongjun paused.

His head tilted slowly, eyes cutting right through him.

“….What did you just say?”

He stepped closer. Gyujin’s body reacted before his thoughts could catch up, stepping back until his spine hit the tile again, the cold sharper this time.

“‘Tell me’…? Shouldn’t you have said ‘ask me’?”

Seongjun’s fingers gripped Gyujin’s cheeks, digging in just enough to force his head up.

“My dick get to your fucking head? Since when are we on terms of you ordering me around?”

“Please,” Gyujin blurted, pulse hammering. His voice softened to something small.
“…please, Seongjun.”

Seongjun stilled.

His lips twitched, wickedly brief, as if to say he found the whole thing pathetic.

He let go of Gyujin’s cheeks and crouched down so they were eye-level, his presence suffocating.

“Say it again.”

Gyujin touched his own cheek, like the lingering heat stung.
“..say what?”

“Go on. Beg me.” Seongjun’s voice didn’t rise; it didn’t have to. “You were already pretty set on it.”

A breath left Gyujin—small, tremoring—as his eyes dipped.

“Please… please, Seongjun…”

“Again. Better this time.”

Gyujin faltered, forcing himself to raise his eyes.

“Please… please, I’m sorry, please, please Seongjun, please… I’ll… please…”

“Try again.”

“Please…” His voice went lower, breaking at the edges as he dropped his gaze again.
“…please, hyung… I—I’m sorry… please, just… please don’t—not in front of the teachers…”

That did it.
Seongjun went still.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered, straightening to his full height.

“Yeah, alright. Whatever.” He ran a hand through his hair, then looked back down at Gyujin.

“Don’t be too friendly with everyone who’s nice to you.”

Then, without looking back, he walked out of the bathroom.

The door thudded shut, and the air around Gyujin loosened all at once. He stayed leaning against the wall, staring at the floor, lungs dragging in a heavy exhale.

What am I even doing?

He looked at the door, quiet and hollow.

Was he supposed to deal with Seongjun’s mood shifts forever? Was there really no way to stop walking on eggshells? Did Seongjun even realize he acted irrationally?

The last question—the one he didn’t want to be thinking at all—hung in the air for a moment.

Why can’t I leave?

It softened, losing its weight, dissolving into the quiet between his thoughts. He swallowed, pushed off the wall, and headed back to class, the question fading before it could take hold.

★ ☆

All he could see was his phone.

Everything else dissolved into a kind of weightless dark, the kind where sound didn’t echo so much as smear at the edges. The screen glowed faintly where it sat in front of him, ringing and ringing, insistently, like something alive. It wasn’t his usual tone. It wasn’t a text. It wasn’t Seongjun. It wasn’t Youngdong. It wasn’t Woojae. It wasn’t even his mother.

It was worse than a sound.
It was a presence.

Every vibration hummed against the surface beneath it, like someone on the other end was brushing their fingers across the screen, searching for his hand through the light. The tone stretched, warping into something elongated—thin, distorted—until it stopped sounding like a ringtone at all.

It sounded like a voice.

Gyujin…

It echoed through the dark, slow and reverberating, bouncing between the empty walls of his head.

Gyujin…

Gyujin…

“Park Gyujin! For goodness’ sake!”

He jolted upright like something had dropped him back into his body. A sharp inhale punched out of him. Reality slammed back in with the sting on his cheek and the fluorescent lights overhead.

Woojae stood in front of him, scowling as he wiped imaginary dust off his binder as if waking Gyujin up with it had somehow contaminated it.

“Do you intend to sleep through midterm preparations?” Woojae said, voice clipped and incredulous. “Remarkable. You sleep like concrete.”

Gyujin stared at him, mind still dragging itself out of the fog. Of all people who could have bothered waking him—*after everything in the principal’s office*—why would it be Woojae?

Guilt pricked at him.
He knew the right thing would’ve been to speak up. Even if it got ignored. Even if the whole mess had only mattered to Woojae because it affected him directly.

“About the… um, principal thing—I’m sorry, I should’ve—”

“That’s irrelevant,” Woojae cut in immediately, sliding his binder into his bag with the efficiency of someone too smart to waste time on emotional debris.

“It didn’t cross my mind even once that you held enough defiance to speak up against Seongjun. I didn’t request for you to be there after all.”

Yeah. He was right.
Gyujin didn’t have enough defiance. He never did.

“You didn’t have to wake me up…” Gyujin muttered, gathering his textbooks. “You being nice to me is what caused this in the first place.”

Woojae rolled his eyes so hard it was practically a full-body gesture.

“My intent was not to wake you out of some benevolent desire to be *‘nice to you,’* nor to engage in small talk.” His voice dipped into contempt. “Your senile boyfriend has been texting you and requested you *‘check your phone before he smashes it.’”*

The last line came out with a mockingly flat emphasis—Seongjun’s words spat out like something beneath Woojae’s vocabulary.

Gyujin’s pulse skipped.
He hurriedly turned on his phone—only to be met with the empty battery icon blinking up at him.

Dead.

He blinked up at Woojae, confusion knitting through his expression.
How did Woojae even know Seongjun had texted him if the phone wasn't on?

Woojae noticed instantly. Of course he did. He exhaled sharply, irritated by having to explain anything twice.

"Seongjun asked me to tell you to check it. When I saw you were sleeping, I assumed you were ignoring the constant buzzing, but evidently the battery is dead on top of that."

That only made it worse.

"Why would Seongjun ask you to do that?" Gyujin said, the confusion threading through every word.

Woojae just stared at him, unimpressed, like Gyujin had asked him the world's most pointless question.

"You see…"

—FLASHBACK—

Woojae exited the principal's office, frustration bleeding through the edges of his normally composed demeanor, fingers tightening on his tie as if straightening it could straighten out the tension coiling in his chest.

He started toward class—before a foot slammed into the wall, blocking his path with a deliberate, territorial weight.

He didn't flinch outwardly, but the edge of his teeth gritted anyway, a twitch of internal irritation at the audacity.

"Are you stupid or do you just have a death wish?" Seongjun's voice sliced through the hallway, wind lashing at order and control, testing Woojae's calm like a storm against glass.

Woojae's eyes flicked to him, arching a brow sharply, voice clipped and controlled.

"You, of all people, calling me stupid is a jarring statement."

Seongjun slid his foot off the wall slowly, eyes narrowing. "Do you even know how many people you piss off by acting like you were born with a stick up your ass? You made the principal go interrogating half the grade. If I smashed your head in right now, everyone would cheer. Real good job genius."

Woojae rolled his eyes, scoffing like the threat barely grazed him. "I don't have time for a useless back and forth. Step aside. You can't do anything to me here. Your attempts to instill fear only work on people as oblivious to reality as that pathetic pet you keep on a leash."

Something in the air sharpened.

“Say that again,” Seongjun said, voice low.

“What?” Woojae raised a brow. “Are you perplexed that I referred to Gyujin as a ‘pathetic pet’?”

He almost laughed. Almost.

“Goodness. I suppose he’s not the only one on a leash.”

He stepped forward—*got exactly one step*—

Before Seongjun kicked the back of his knee.

Woojae let out a clipped noise, staggering, eyes flashing with fury as he steadied himself.

“Keep this up and I’ll actually snap your legs next time.” Seongjun’s voice edged harder now, subtle venom threading beneath the warning, as if Woojae daring to insult Gyujin had cut deeper than it should.

Woojae exhaled sharply, almost a scoff, forcing himself upright, straightening the leg as though posture alone could undo the sting.

“Maybe if you put some strength into your brain, you’d understand—Gyujin thinks this of himself too. Do you think he doesn’t know that’s how you see him?”

Something in Seongjun stuttered—barely, a catch in the machinery he didn’t know he had.

A pet.

He stilled. Not because it wasn’t true, but because someone who barely knew anything—Woojae—had landed on the exact shape
Gyujin once used for himself.

Gyujin said it. At the club. Quiet. Offhand. Like he’d already accepted it.

Did Gyujin still see himself that way?
Did he think *Seongjun* still saw him that way?

The first time it came out of Gyujin’s mouth, it hadn’t felt right then either.

Not satisfying. Not confirming anything.
More like someone had turned a mirror toward him at the wrong angle.

It was a word he’d tossed around—*joke, warning, leash*—but hearing Gyujin claim it for himself had made something in him falter. Like Gyujin had stepped into a role Seongjun never actually wanted him to accept, only react to.

If that word didn’t fit anymore…then when had it stopped?

And what exactly did that make Gyujin now?

He kept replaying yesterday in the back of his mind—the moment it hit him that Gyujin wasn't scared. Not in the same trembling way as before. Not in the way that used to anchor everything between them.

And he didn't want Gyujin afraid, not really. Not anymore. Not like that.

Gyujin didn't think of himself as a pet anymore.

…Right?

He thought about that stupid beach conversation he overheard—not Woojae pushing for emotional honesty, but Woojae dissecting the situation like a bored surgeon, calling everything between them *"bizarre,"* telling Gyujin to *"test the waters,"* telling him to deal with him directly.

Gyujin saying his name like it was something heavy. Something he didn't understand himself.

Both of them circling the issue, never landing on it, never letting it take any kind of shape.

And that—*that*—was what started to get under his skin.

Not the details.
Not what happened.

But the emptiness around it.
The way everything stayed undefined, blurry, unspoken.

Because anything that never solidifies can turn into anything at all. It can shift. Twist.

That was the thing that crawled into him Saturday night. The thing that made his pulse glitch in ways he didn't want to recognize.

Something shapeless.
Something that felt like it could become dangerous if he acknowledged it too directly.
Something he couldn't predict because he refused—*absolutely refused*—to look at it head-on.

"Your silence only confirms my suspicions."

Woojae's scalpel-sharp voice cut into his head.

"You're both utterly incapable of responsibility or recognition. I doubt either of you will rise above that. What a charming match. You two aren't so different after all."

Seongjun ran a hand through his hair with a flicker of contempt, debating whether to even invest attention.

"Yah. If you want to play counselor, I'll make a deal with you."

Woojae's glasses catching the light like a blade. "When the hell did I say I wanted to counsel your ridiculous—"

"Fucking hell, just listen." Seongjun snapped.

"You tried getting him to stop spiraling at the beach, and you're too much of a stuck-up asshole for him to ever get close to, so I'm not worried. But because you are, he'll say things to you he won't say to me. Get him to stop shutting down, and I'll leave you alone."

Woojae blinked at him, flat, unimpressed, like the answer was obvious.

"You actually heard the whole thing and still broke my glasses. Why would I, in any universe, believe you could keep your end of that deal?"

Seongjun's patience thinned, tight and taut as a wire. "Jihoon wants to beat you up more than I do, probably has a fucking crush on you judging by how often he talks about it. Don't be surprised when it happens if you don't agree."

Woojae's face twisted in genuine disgust. "That's revolting. But unfortunately, at this point, I don't see another way out. Fine. I'll hold my end of the deal."

——END OF FLASHBACK——

"Let's just say we came at an agreement that benefits us both. The semantics of it are unnecessary." Woojae said, shaking his head slightly, like he could flick the memory of the whole ridiculous encounter right out of his skull.

Gyujin didn't have the energy to question it further. If it didn't end in bruises or blood, anything worked.

"As long as everyone's fine." The words slipped out low, tangled with a quiet sigh he barely registered himself making.

He slung his bag over his shoulder, the motion smooth, almost indifferent, but it wasn't physical exhaustion weighing him down—it was mental, the kind that leaves your muscles moving but your mind heavy and tangled.

Woojae noticed. Humans were simpler than numbers when you looked closely. Predictable. Transparent.

He exhaled sharply, tone clipped, almost calculating. "Is this your resting condition, or is Seongjun actively withering everything he comes in contact with?"

Gyujin froze mid-step, glancing sideways at Woojae. He'd confided in him before about things he couldn't voice to anyone else—*about Seongjun*—but today wasn't about Seongjun. Today he didn't want Woojae parsing his emotions as if they were a math problem.

"It's not about Seongjun." Gyujin's voice came tight, clipped, carrying that brittle edge of restraint. "It's personal. The date my dad disappeared five years ago is tomorrow."

Woojae froze, a momentary flicker passing over his features.

If this were about Seongjun, the equation would be simpler. Why am I being forced into the role of his unpaid psychological consultant?

Before he could even form a response, Gyujin spoke again, voice low but resolute. “Don’t tell Seongjun… he won’t care either way.”

And then he turned, walking out of the classroom with that quiet, controlled weight in his movements, leaving the air slightly heavier in his wake.

Woojae watched him go, brow twitching, glasses glinting in the hallway light. He did not feel like playing therapist today, especially when he had real grades to think about, real priorities that demanded attention.

“Thank the heavens.” He muttered, hand pressed to his forehead, relieved he wasn’t being dragged deeper into emotional labor he never signed up for, mixing with acknowledgment that some people, apparently, carried their own storms they refused to share.

★ ☆

A charger, an empty classroom, and a place to hide.

Not even to hide out of fear—just from the noise.

The three things Gyujin tried to force his mind to latch onto right now.

He’d grabbed the charger from his locker without thinking, plugged it into the wall and into his phone, then slid down the wall of the empty art classroom. He crouched on his heels, shoulders folding in slightly, as if bracing himself for whatever waited on the screen.

His phone finally flickered back to life.
He didn’t check notifications, didn’t check the time—just unlocked it immediately.

But something was off.

He braced for a flood of messages—some barrage from Seongjun that would explain why Woojae looked irritated enough to commit murder earlier.

But there was only one.

[crazy bastard]
check your locker
(2:34 P.M)

Gyujin narrowed his eyes at the screen, as if the words would rearrange into something that made sense if he stared long enough.

First problem:
Woojae had told him Seongjun had been texting. Threatening to smash his phone. Acting impatient enough that Woojae actually bothered to wake him up.

But there was only this one text.

Second problem:
He had already opened his locker earlier. Nothing there. Nothing unusual.

He rested his chin on his knees, phone dangling loosely in his hands, each tiny vibration of the charging cable feeling louder than his thoughts.

...Was there something in my locker that was that important that he needed Woojae to tell me to check my phone for…?

Gyujin tapped the side of the phone, eyes flickering toward the door like something invisible was standing just outside it.

Maybe I should double check. Maybe I missed some—

It hit him.

The reason his phone was dead to begin with.

He'd forgotten his charger at Seongjun's house.

And when he grabbed it out of his locker earlier—he never asked himself who put it there. He never even registered that he hadn't.

Something low and tight twisted inside him.
Not fear. Not confusion. Not warped gratitude.

Something else.

The corners of his mouth twitched—barely, a fleeting curve—before he pressed his lips together immediately, smothering it down. He typed quickly.

[me]
thank you
(2:58 P.M)

He exited the app, thumb hovering over the power button. He should let the phone charge. Should study. Should do anything productive after spending half the day half-asleep and half-anxious.

But his finger froze.

He opened the messenger app again.
Tapped on Seongjun's contact.

—contact name successfully changed—

[crazy bastard ^_^]

Still a crazy bastard.
Just… a crazy bastard who wasn't always unbearable.

A crazy bastard who sometimes—*rarely*—did things that made Gyujin's chest go tight in ways he didn't have the vocabulary for.

He wished Seongjun could always be like this.
Even if it was only in these strange, fleeting moments when the bite in him softened just enough for Gyujin to breathe.

Maybe everything really was okay when Seongjun was nice. Maybe Gyujin could pretend it erased the other moments. Pretend it balanced something. Pretend the scales weren't already broken long before this.

His throat tightened.

He wished tomorrow didn't have to come.
Wished he could stay right here in this empty classroom, clinging to this warm, temporary feeling until it drowned everything else out.

If he could just stay here—like this, suspended…

…it'd be so much better than waking up tomorrow.

★ ☆

The morning day finally came, as if everything that seemed to be shifting around him had been swallowed whole. Dug deep into a hole that refused to fill.

The photo had been sitting at the back of his drawer, tucked between old worksheets and a half-dried pen. He hadn't meant to find it today of all days.

Nobody ever said *died.* Just *disappeared.* The word had stayed that way in the house—quiet, unfinished, like something left mid-sentence. Something everyone avoided completing.

The photo was one of those cheap studio prints—his father's hand on his shoulder, his own grin too wide, the kind kids give when they're told to smile. The colors had dulled, but the brightness in his face hadn't. It looked foreign now, like it belonged to someone else entirely.

He traced the frame's edge with his thumb. His reflection blinked back at him—quieter, hollow in ways the boy in the picture never was.

He looked again at the boy in the picture, the easy grin, the sunlight in his hair. The weightless innocence he couldn't remember ever really having, not anymore. Maybe before everything started hollowing out. Before his mother's voice started carrying that polite kind of gentleness—the tone people use when they've stopped expecting things to get better but pretend anyway.

Down the hall came the faint sound of dishes. His mother always made too much rice on this day. Two bowls out of habit, not hope. She never said why she still set the second one down. Maybe she didn't know either. Maybe routines were easier than acceptance.

He looked toward the door for a long moment, then back at the photograph.

The photo wobbled slightly in his hands when he whispered, almost absently, "Did you get to start over?"

It wasn't really a question—more like something that had been circling inside his ribs for years, finally slipping out through a crack he didn't realize was there.

Because he couldn't tell anymore if disappearing was the same as dying. Maybe they just meant the same thing to different people. Maybe he'd already been living with both.

The silence in the room pressed back, unchanging. Heavy. Familiar.

He didn't feel anything. That was the strangest part. Or maybe he felt everything—just too deeply to reach, buried somewhere he'd stopped trying to dig up.

From the kitchen came the sound of a bowl being lifted, then set back down again. Still full. Still waiting for someone who wasn't going to come back home.

He smiled—*barely, thin and hollow*—like he already knew the answer to his own question.

A few moments later he was slinging his bag over his shoulder, sliding his shoes on at the door when his mom called gently over her shoulder.

"You don't have to go to school today if you're not feeling up for it, Gyujin-ah."Her voice wasn't implying anything, just careful concern—soft around the edges, holding its breath.

Gyujin turned halfway, just enough to face her.

He hated seeing that expression on her face.
It twisted something in him.

He needed to be strong for her. Every year he had to pretend this day didn't seep into him like cold water.

He smiled gently. Practiced. “I’m fine, omma. It’s midterm preparations.” He paused. “Don’t work too hard today,” he said the last part lower, almost an exhale.

His mother pressed a hand to her forehead, like she was debating whether to say something. Then she let out a slow sigh.

“Gyujin… I know I’ve been pestering you about today more than usual but…” She trailed off, then steadied herself. “…if a person’s whereabouts remain unknown for five years, the court grants a Judicial Declaration of Disappearance.”

Gyujin froze.

“Sweetheart… as of today, *they’ll legally consider him dead.”*

Her voice hit him like cold water poured down his spine. He just stared at her—expression stalled, breath caught somewhere between his ribs.

The photo stretched out in his mind until it fractured completely.

“Don’t work too hard today,” he repeated softly—numb, like his mouth was moving on instinct. He turned without another word, opening the front door and closing it behind him. If his mother said anything else, it dissolved into the background. He didn’t hear it.

Breathe in.
Breathe out.
That’s what he tried to focus on as he walked to the bus stop.

He glanced to his right where the trees lined the sidewalk, their branches shifting against the early light. He brushed his bangs out of his face with a long, shaky exhale.

“If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around to hear it, does it make a sound…or was it silent?”

His voice was steady, but under his breath, barely there. More thought than sound.

“Yah! Kid! Are you going to get on or not?” the bus driver called—Gyujin hadn’t even realized he was standing in the doorway.

He quickly bowed in apology and walked inside.

★ ☆

School was supposed to be a distraction, something that would force Gyujin’s thoughts somewhere, anywhere, else.

But his mind felt like the distraction itself. Like his own willpower was the only thin barrier keeping him from spiraling all the way down.

Sweetheart… as of today, they'll legally consider him dead.

Stop—stop it.

Sweetheart… as of today, they'll legally consider him dead.

Stop… he's not… I… would know if he was…

Sweetheart… as of today, they'll legally consider him dead.

…can someone just—just… stop existing when they're not even dead..?

Sweetheart… as of today, they'll legally consider him dead.

Could I… if I wanted… to stop? Why is he—
why is he the only one…

as of today, they'll legally consider him dead.

…stop.

they'll legally consider him dead.

…stop, it's not… it's not true…

consider him dead.

Why couldn't I stop existing?

A sharp kick to the back of his chair snapped Gyujin out of it.

He didn't need to turn to know who it was. He didn't startle or jerk upright; his eyes just blinked, unfocused, as if someone had woken him with a light tap to the cheek.

He kept staring ahead, though his fingers curled tightly into his palms. Pressing hard. Too hard.

"Is this kid fucking mute now?"
Seongjun's voice slid under his skin like something invasive, oily, unwanted.

Gyujin's fingers dug deeper. He didn't answer. Didn't flinch. Didn't turn around. His fists tightened until the sting in his skin felt almost grounding.

Seongjun clicked his tongue, irritation bleeding through the sound.

The hell is wrong with him?

Another kick—this time to the leg of Gyujin's chair, harder. It jolted Gyujin forward, a tiny involuntary jerk in his shoulders.

"Yah. Fuckgyu—"

Stop it. Stop stop stop. Stop, I…

Gyujin snapped up in a blink.
The legs of his chair scraped harshly across the tile, the sound slicing the air and cutting off Seongjun's voice entirely.

He turned, breath tearing in and out of him.

"Stop it, stop, it stop, stop, stop it!"

His hands were shaking—*violently, uncontrollably*—and before he even understood what he was doing, he grabbed the chair he had just been sitting in and hurled it across the room.

The back lockers caught the hit with a violent crash. The chair rattled, skidding across the tile.

It missed Seongjun by inches.
Heads whipped toward him.
The room froze.
Voices died mid-breath.

"Stop— I… I want to stop…"Gyujin muttered it through shaking breaths, chest rising and falling too fast. Then quieter, almost swallowed by the thrum in his skull…

"…I want everything to stop."

And then he bolted.

In a blink—like something bursting out of a trap—he dashed out of the classroom. The door slammed behind him so hard it trembled in its frame.

Silence held the class for a heartbeat.

Then came the murmurs.

The snickers.
The whispers.
The confused mutters.
The mocking under-their-breath laughs that pretended they weren't staring.

"Has he gone insane?"
"What the hell was that?"
"What's wrong with him?"

It all blended together—*a hazy, ugly noise*—but none of it mattered.

Because Gyujin was already gone.

And for once…

Seongjun just stared at the door, genuinely stunned, like he wasn't entirely sure what reality he had just witnessed.

He rubbed an eye, blinking slowly, almost irritated that he had to confirm he wasn't dreaming.

He blinked again.

Yeah. Very much real.

"…The fuck crawled up his ass this morning?"
Confusion—*real confusion*—slipped into his voice.

He was fine yesterday.
***We** were fine yesterday.*
What the hell was—

"You don't get it, do you?"

Woojae's chair scraped toward him, the sound as sharp as his voice. His scalpel tone dragged Seongjun's attention away from the empty doorway.

Seongjun rolled his eyes—not dramatically or childish, just enough to say Woojae's existence was inconvenient.

"You think I'm some mind reader? How the hell am I supposed to just *'get'* what he crashed out over?"

"Gyujin's father disappeared five years ago,"
Woojae said, tone flat, clinical — like he was reciting a fact from a research paper.

"And today happens to be the anniversary."

Seongjun blinked at him.
Unimpressed.
Unmoved.

That's it? Over a dad he never sees? Seriously?

"So what?" Seongjun scoffed, almost offended by how underwhelming the explanation felt.
"How is the date worth all of that if he hasn't mentioned it once."

Woojae held his gaze for a long, cold second.

"Why in god's name would he tell you?"

He adjusted his glasses with precise annoyance.

“Your memory is astonishingly selective. You’re the one who typed it in the class groupchat — weeks ago, not years. *‘Don’t you know? Fuckgyu doesn’t have a dad.’* Does that ring a bell?”

Seongjun froze for a second—like his brain lagged.

He really had forgotten. Or—he never bothered to store the weight of what he said.

“I assumed you understood what you were weaponizing,” Woojae said, voice turning glacial. “But clearly you only knew the fact—not the weight of it.”

The bell rang. Woojae snapped his binder shut.

“Knowing he doesn’t have a father is one thing. Knowing *when* it happened requires *actual attention.* Something you’ve never given him.”

He slipped his binder into his bag, movements neat, edged with irritation.

“And let’s be logical,” Woojae continued, voice thinning with disdain. “If anyone needs therapeutic chaperones it’s you. Gyujin is far more concise than you are. You can’t even go talk to him yourself.”

He slid a notebook into his bag.

“And don’t misunderstand,” Woojae said, pushing up his glasses, tone cool. “I don’t have any personal investment in that terminally avoidant project of a victim. I consider him insufferably compliant.”

He paused.

“But even I knew what today was.”

The air shifted.
Something twisted in Seongjun’s jaw—tightening, grinding.

Woojae sighed, the barest hint of pity creeping into his tone.

“He’s been holding himself together with dental floss, and you keep yanking on it, now wondering why it snapped.”

He slung his bag over his shoulder, turned toward the door, then called over his shoulder:

“I’ll advise you not to look shocked when he stops coming back at all.”

Then he left, door clicking shut behind him, leaving the truth heavier than the silence that followed.

Staring at the doorway as students started filing out like nothing had happened. Like the last ten minutes hadn't been a warning sign shaking the ground under them.

He finally groaned under his breath.

"Everything's so damn annoying," he muttered.

Annoying.
That was what he chose to call it.
Gyujin could've told him. He could've said something.

But he didn't.
Gyujin didn't trust him.
~~Because of something *he* did.~~

Something twisted inside Seongjun's chest—unfamiliar, sharp, scraping.

~~Guilt.~~

Seongjun pulled out his phone, opening the groupchat with his lackeys. His fingers typed:

[me]
find Gyujin-

He stopped. Deleted it. Typed again:

[me]
find fuckgyu-

Stopped again.

His fingers hovered, remembering Gyujin's voice in the car the other night:

'...sometimes I hide out on the rooftop.'

Shit.

If he was on the rooftop right now…

He wouldn't.
Right?

What the hell did he mean by *'stop everything'?*

A raindrop hit the classroom window.
Then another.
Then it was pouring.

His breathing stuttered.

He didn’t know why he was already on his feet, or why his body moved before his mind caught up, or what the hell he thought he was going to say.

He was already out the door.

He left his phone, his books, everything on the desk.

He ran across the building, up the stairs, up another set—his heartbeat louder than the storm.

He snapped the rusted rooftop door open.

It creaked—

And there he was.

Gyujin.

Sitting on the rooftop edge. Not near—*on.*

Feet dangling into open air, head bowed, rain drenching every inch of him. His shoulders trembled like the cold had gotten inside him, or maybe his thoughts had.

Seongjun’s breath hitched. Hard.

“Gyujin.”
His voice wove through his heavy breathing, urgent but almost unreal in his own ears.

Gyujin didn’t turn. Not at first.
Just wiped at his eye, pointless in the rain.

“Fuck—Gyujin! Get the fuck down!”

The rain swallowed half the shout but he didn’t care. Didn’t care that he was drenched too. Didn’t care that his hands were shaking.

Gyujin exhaled, a long, trembling sound and finally turned.

And in an instant he was yanked back off the edge.

He stumbled into Seongjun’s chest, disoriented, breath caught—

And then Seongjun *hugged* him.

Tight.

“Don’t—I can’t *breathe* when you’re not here.”
The words left Seongjun’s mouth like they weren’t meant to. Like he didn’t hear himself until after they were already out.

Gyujin froze.
Completely.

His hands hovered awkwardly at his sides, trembling. He didn't know what to do.
Didn't know what he was allowed to do.

Didn't know how to process the fact that…

Seongjun was worried.
Seongjun came for him.
Seongjun *cared.*

Something hot slipped down Gyujin's cheek—
the first tear that didn't feel like rain.

Then another.
And another.

His face pressed into Seongjun's shirt and he shook harder, His shoulders shivered, breath breaking into small, clipped sobs.

They stayed like that.

No words.
Just the storm around them, and the storm between them.

Finally, Seongjun pulled back slightly, hands still on Gyujin's shoulders, crouching just enough to meet his eyes.

"Stop—"
He cut himself off.

Stop fucking crying.

"…fucking hell."

He slid an arm around Gyujin's waist and lifted him—easily, almost instinctively.

Gyujin's legs wrapped around him without thinking, a shock of tension running through him at the closeness.

Seongjun didn't comment.
Didn't smirk.
Didn't weaponize the moment.

He just moved toward the door.

"You'll get sick out here," he muttered.

Gyujin didn't answer.
He exhaled shakily against Seongjun's shoulder instead.

Behind them, the rain hammered the rooftop.
The door slammed shut.
The downpour faded into a muted roar.

But the storm—*both of them*—stayed.

★ ☆

Seongjun didn't take him far—just down the stairs. The P.E. locker room sat tucked right beside the rooftop exit, sterile tile and fluorescent lights replacing the rain-soaked concrete. It was better than dragging Gyujin through the building drenched and shaking like this.

He guided him to a bench and sat him down, the movement a little rough but careful in its own strange way. Seongjun grabbed a towel from the shelf and started scrubbing it through Gyujin's hair, droplets flicking off the strands onto Seongjun's already damp shirt. His own hair clung to his forehead, still dripping a faint line down his jaw.

Gyujin didn't say a word. Not when Seongjun dried his hair. Not when Seongjun asked if he was cold, if he wanted to go home, if he wanted to stay, if he needed dry clothes.

It wasn't defiance. He wasn't refusing him.
He just… didn't know how to exist right now.

Why had Seongjun come up there?
Why did he care?
Why now?

The anger wasn't at Seongjun—it never was. It was the fact that Seongjun had cared enough to show up. Enough to drag him out of the rain like he mattered.

He was terrified of how much that care meant.

He couldn't look at Seongjun. His chest felt tight with shame. He'd done this the day after Seongjun had actually done something kind for him—something that hadn't been coated in threats or cruelty. As if it hadn't mattered at all. As if he'd thrown it back in his face.

He wasn't going to jump. But he'd made Seongjun think he might. He'd never imagined he could impact someone like that—least of all someone like Seongjun.

Should he apologize? Explain the mess in his head? Collapse into Seongjun's shirt again like some helpless thing?

No.
No.
He couldn't.

He wanted to speak, he really did, but nothing came out. His throat felt locked, tight with a thousand unspoken things. Seongjun was drying his clothes now. The wet fabric clung to Gyujin's skin in a way that felt too familiar—nostalgic in sick a way.

Seongjun patched him up the same way he hurt him. Like those things were the only two ways he knew how to touch someone.

But this time… it wasn't Seongjun's fault.
He hadn't told him what day it was because of something he did, sure—but Gyujin never thought it would matter. He assumed Seongjun wouldn't care either way.

This was Gyujin.
This was his fault.

His fault he never found answers about his dad.
His fault he stayed weak.
His fault he couldn't grow, couldn't change, couldn't do anything except drown quietly in the same place.

Seongjun said he couldn't breathe without Gyujin.
Gyujin wasn't sure he could find the *will to live* without Seongjun.

Something restless, small, and desperate twisted inside him. He slid the towel out of Seongjun's hands, gripping it in his own lap.

The sudden interruption made Seongjun tilt his head back with an exhale of irritation, pinching the bridge of his nose like he was trying to keep his patience from slipping.

"Seriously, Gyujin, if you're not going to say anything, how the hell am I supposed to—"

The words caught somewhere in his throat when Gyujin lifted the towel and gently scrubbed at Seongjun's hair.

A tiny, involuntary twitch passed through Seongjun's jaw. His eyes narrowed the slightest bit, looking down at Gyujin like this small, unexpected gesture was somehow more aggravating than the silence.

Why was he even bothering? Gyujin wouldn't talk. He was alive, off the rooftop, half-dry. Seongjun could walk out right now.

But then—

"…please."

Small. Barely a whisper. Like it had to claw its way out.

He lowered his hands slowly to his lap, fingers curling into trembling fists.

"…tell me what to do, like always… I can't— I can't think…"

His eyes stayed fixed downward, fingers tightening into his palms until a single tear landed soundlessly on his skin.

"…please."

Seongjun blinked. Gyujin hadn't spoken once since the rooftop—not even then. And the first thing out of his mouth was a plea. Asking Seongjun to tell him what to do.

Now Gyujin was crying again, silently, letting the tears fall in small tremors that dotted his hands. He looked breakable in a way that felt wrong. Like he didn't know how to exist unless Seongjun showed him how.

Seongjun dragged a hand through his hair, exhaling through his teeth.

Right.
Gyujin was nothing without him.
How the hell had he forgotten that?

He tilted Gyujin's head up with one hand, swiped a tear away with his thumb, then pulled him closer.

"You don't need to be told what to do." Seongjun twisted him gently until Gyujin's back was pressed against his chest, settled on his lap like he belonged there. "As long as you're good, then you're doing what you should be doing—acting the way you should be."

He cupped Gyujin's cheeks and tilted his face up, forcing their eyes to meet.

"And what happens when you're not good? I get mad, right? Was I mad at you earlier?"

Gyujin shook his head. A small desperate denial. A silent no.

Seongjun hummed, satisfied, releasing his face. Gyujin's bangs slipped back over his eyes, shadowing them.

A larger hand threaded through that damp hair, slow and possessive, before Seongjun spoke again—words Gyujin never imagined he'd hear from him.

"Because you didn't do anything wrong."

Gyujin didn't freeze because of the touch.
It was the sentence—simple, impossible—that made his mind fracture.

It's my fault.
I was in the wrong.
I could've helped.
I should've done something.
It was my fault—

"People who can't abandon anything can't change anything," Seongjun continued, voice low, like he already knew where Gyujin's mind was spiraling. "The only person blaming you is

yourself, ‘cause you’re fucking stupid.”

His hand slid to Gyujin’s chin, shaking it lightly.

“I told you I don’t care if your little brain’s all messed up.”

He wiped another tear from Gyujin’s cheek, hesitating for half a second—*something he never did*—before exhaling sharply, annoyed at himself.

“Gyujin, even if you think I won’t give a shit, come to me. I’ll probably not give a shit…” Seongjun brushed Gyujin’s bangs away, the pause stretching between them.

“Just don’t disappear.”

The word felt like a silver stone skipping along a dark lake.

Only an hour ago Gyujin had wished exactly that—to disappear, vanish, dissolve into quiet nothingness. He’d convinced himself no one would care for more than a few days. Maybe only his mother. And she’d probably be relieved not to worry anymore.

But Seongjun said it like it mattered. Like it terrified him.

Gyujin twisted suddenly, turning to fully face Seongjun—*close, too close*—but instead of pulling away, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around him.

Seongjun stiffened. “The hell—?”

“I’m sorry for scaring you,” Gyujin mumbled into his shirt, his voice muffled but steady. He didn’t let go. He didn’t even try.

This was the first time Gyujin initiated contact like this. Like he needed him.

Seongjun scoffed awkwardly and glanced aside. “Yah, you didn’t—”

He cut himself off and pushed Gyujin off, hands on his shoulders, not rough, just abrupt.

But when their eyes met, instead of a tear-streaked mess, Gyujin was smiling—a tiny fractured thing, but real.

Soft. Quiet. A weird little exhale of a laugh leaving him.
Seongjun stared like he didn’t know what to do with it.

“You’re fucking weird, Gyujin.” He scoffed again and pulled him down so his head rested on Seongjun’s lap, Gyujin’s legs sprawled along the wooden bench. Seongjun flicked Gyujin’s forehead lightly. “So don’t do it again.”

Gyujin winced and rubbed his forehead, narrowing his eyes up at him, but he didn’t move away.

Seongjun leaned down, brows pulling together—something like concern flickering for only a second. Gyujin parted his lips to ask about it, but Seongjun beat him to it.

“Your clothes are dry but your body’s probably still wet. We should take off your shirt—”

Gyujin’s eyes widened, color rising instantly in his cheeks. He shot his hands up, pushing at Seongjun’s chest, holding him back in frantic embarrassment.

“Seongjun seriously…”

★ ☆

About three weeks had passed since then. Midterms loomed close enough to taste, and everyone was visibly worn down, hollowed out by late nights and caffeine and the slow panic of grades. And still, somehow, they were expected to show up for useless classes like P.E.

Gyujin glanced out the window to his side. The light looked wrong—too warm for how cold the air was. Trees thrashed under the wind outside, branches bending violently, but the birds clung stubbornly to them anyway. Balanced. Unbothered. Like they knew something humans didn’t.

The locker room buzzed with trivial noise. Jokes tossed back and forth, boys shoving each other, phones checked one last time before being shoved into lockers. Complaints layered over complaints—about how unfair it was to still be here when midterms were this close.

Everything was normal.

Gyujin let out a quiet breath and lowered his gaze, fingers fumbling with his tie. The sigh wasn’t exhaustion or frustration. If anything, it was relief. Not because things were normal—*they always were*—but because normal didn’t feel wrong against him anymore. Like he wasn’t visibly out of place just for existing.

He tugged at the knot, finally loosening it—

—and his hair was yanked back.

Released just as fast.

Gyujin stumbled half a step, startled more by reflex than fear. He didn’t bother turning. “What the hell, Seongjun…” he muttered, rubbing the back of his head as he tilted it just enough to side-eye him.

Before he could turn fully, Seongjun’s hand clamped onto his shoulder and spun him around.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Seongjun snapped, eyes narrowing as they locked onto Gyujin’s loosened tie. He grabbed it and tightened it back into place, fingers sharp and

efficient, like correcting something that annoyed him.

Gyujin blinked, looking down at his straightened tie, then back up at him. “You’ve already made me miss five P.E classes,” he grumbled. “At this rate I’ll end up like the coach…”

Both of them glanced toward the window.

Outside stood the very overweight coach, his bald head catching the light as the wind blew harsher. His hands flew up instinctively to pat down hair that wasn’t there before realization hit him and he shook his head, palm pressing to his forehead.

Gyujin covered his mouth with the back of his hand, a faint laugh slipping through.

Seongjun clicked his tongue, unimpressed, dragging his gaze back to Gyujin.

“Your brain might already be leveled to his,” Seongjun said flatly, grabbing Gyujin’s wrist and hauling him toward the door without hesitation.

Gyujin stumbled forward despite himself, even though he should’ve been used to this by now. He furrowed his brows, narrowing his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean…?”

Seongjun glanced back over his shoulder, lips curling lazily before flattening again. “Means you’re a fucking idiot.”

A scoff escaped Gyujin as he yanked his wrist free, rubbing at it even though he didn’t slow down or stop. He kept walking beside Seongjun through the empty hallway.

Seongjun raised a brow at him, letting out a short, sharp laugh that barely counted as one. “What? Are you mad?” His tone stayed indifferent, like the answer genuinely didn’t matter.

A slight laugh escaped Gyujin before he could stop it. “…why would I be mad,” he said quietly, eyes fixed on his shoes skidding against the tile as he rubbed his wrist. “You were just gripping my wrist too hard.”

Seongjun hummed, glancing briefly at Gyujin’s wrist before shoving his own hands into his pockets. “Didn’t notice.”

Back in the locker room, the chatter never slowed. No one really reacted. Most students were used to it by now. No one really cared anymore. The unspoken rule of ignoring Seongjun’s behavior had long overtaken any urge to intervene.

One student muttered as he watched them leave, rubbing the back of his neck.
“Man, those two really won’t get along.”

Another tying his shoelaces nodded. “Yeah. I swear they’ll hate each other till their hair’s all grey. How long’s it been? Feels like the whole high school experience. Dunno how you can hate someone that long.”

Woojae’s locker slammed shut, sharp and cutting. He didn’t look at them when he spoke.
“That’s a shallow read.”

Before he could leave the locker room, a ball flew toward him at violent speed. He stepped back in one precise movement, letting it smash into the white wall instead, leaving behind a grime-stained mark.

He snapped his head toward the thrower, glasses nearly slipping.

“Yah, four eyes,” Jihoon called, Minhyuk strolling lazily beside him with an apple juice in hand. “Seongjun wants you to meet him at the old storage room.”

Woojae gave them a flat, unimpressed stare and adjusted his glasses.

“How moronic do you think I am?” He said coldly. “That arrangement between that maniacal imbecile and I ended over two weeks ago. Seongjun finally grew a pair and handled his own interpersonal issues.”

His eyes sharpened, cutting into the fading smugness on their faces.

“Your attempts to provoke violence are even more ineffective than that imbecile himself. I will not hesitate to report you both if either of you lays a finger on me, especially during midterms. You two, unlike your little pack leader, do not have the protection of the descendants of the tenth monarch of the Joseon dynasty.”

He walked out without another glance, ignoring the confused muttering behind him.

“Huh? Who the fuck is Joseon?” Minhyuk whispered, elbowing Jihoon.

Jihoon slapped Minhyuk’s shoulder, scowling. “Yah, what the hell is your brain made of? Horse shit? Joseon was a kingdom. A kingdom. Not a person.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, frowning despite himself.
“Man… didn’t know Seongjun was related to that though… what was his name again…”

Jihoon pulled out his phone, Minhyuk hovering too close over his shoulder as he searched.

Woojae scoffed quietly to himself as he walked away.

“Brainless cretins.”

★ ☆

Students started grumpily filling up the field as the activities began. The wind was still as harsh as before, cutting through the space and shoving Gyujin’s hair into his eyes as he sat on the grey concrete stairs further back, watching the unfortunate sight unfold like a punishment no one could opt out of.

Seongjun dropped down beside him without warning, shoving a canned coffee from the vending machine into Gyujin's hands before leaning forward, elbows braced against his knees in lazy sprawl. Gyujin twisted the can slowly between his palms.

It's the same one.
The same one from the time he poured it down my throat.

The memory left a sour curl in his stomach, but it was probably the only drink Seongjun ever assumed he liked. Or tolerated.

Gyujin sighed quietly and cracked the can open anyway.

Semantics, I guess.

He wiped the corner of his mouth and glanced sideways. Seongjun was tapping away at his phone, expression bored and sharp all at once.

Not his own phone.

Gyujin's phone.

Gyujin leaned closer and reached over, tapping the crouch button on the PUBG screen in the corner. "You'll get targeted quicker if you stand the whole time and fuck up my K/D."

Seongjun slid his eyes over, then turned the phone toward Gyujin. Without hesitation, he emptied the rest of the bullets straight into the ground and ran directly into a group of enemies, getting killed instantly—*on purpose.*

Gyujin's eyes widened as he snatched the phone back.
"Why did you do that—?!"

Seongjun dragged his tongue against his cheek, a sharp laugh clicking out of him.
"Always so fucking funny. No idea why you care about that shitty game so much."

Gyujin dragged a frustrated hand through his hair, shut off the phone, and shoved it into his pocket.
"…no idea why you care if I attend P.E," he muttered, the words thin with defense.

Seongjun pointed toward the coach lounging on a bench, lazily waving his arms at the exhausted students dragging themselves across the field.

"Why the hell would I take health advice from that fat sack of shit," Seongjun scoffed out, rolling his shoulder back so his elbow rested against his knee again.
"Probably slept through whatever training he had to end up as the coach."

Gyujin rubbed at his eye as dust kicked up by the wind scraped against his skin, imagining how much worse it had to be down there on the field.

"What does that have to do with me attending…?"

Seongjun lifted a brow slowly.
“What are you? A free-for-all?” His voice sharpened, irritation bleeding through like Gyujin should’ve known exactly why. “Why should I let you get changed in front of a bunch of guys?”

Gyujin stared at Seongjun for a second too long, then bit the inside of his cheek and looked away.

Not everyone is like you. Seriously.

Sudden footsteps came rushing toward them from behind, fast and uneven.

“Yah! Seongjun! Fucking hell, we finally found you!”

Both of them turned to see Minhyuk and Jihoon stumbling toward them, panting hard, hands braced on their knees like they’d run across the entire school just to get here.

Seongjun blinked at them.
“What?”

Before the silence could stretch, Minhyuk straightened up and slapped Jihoon’s back, urging him to breathe. Jihoon lifted his phone with a shaking arm.

“Yah, yah, you’re related to this guy?!”

He practically tossed the phone at Seongjun. Seongjun caught it and skimmed the glowing article.

“…Yeonsangun of Joseon. 1476 to 1506…”
“…historians often describe him as the worst tyrant in Joseon, even Korean, history…”
“…two major purges of the scholar-official class, killing many officials and—”

Seongjun stopped reading, scoffed sharply, and tossed the phone back.

“Who the hell told you I’m related to this guy? Seriously, how stupid are you two?”

Minhyuk and Jihoon looked at each other.

“Dammit, four eyes,” they muttered almost in sync.

Gyujin let out a quiet laugh under his breath.
“Of course it was him…”

Jihoon snapped his head toward Gyujin like he’d just struck gold.
“Yah, Fuckgyu, you hate this kid too, right? Yeah??”

Seongjun’s jaw twitched. His glare cut sideways instantly.
“Don’t talk to him.”

Jihoon stepped back with an awkward laugh.
“Ha—yeah, yeah. I get it, I get it.”

Jihoon and Minhyuk walked off a few seconds later, muttering to each other under their breath. Jihoon shot one last look over his shoulder, caught Seongjun’s glare still pinned to him like a blade, and immediately picked up his pace. Minhyuk followed suit without question, their voices dropping as they scurried away.

Gyujin felt the awkwardness hit all at once. Jihoon talking to him like that—*casual, assuming*—sat wrong in his gut. Like he was expected to nod along. Like he was supposed to be okay with them hurting Woojae just because Seongjun was next to him.

He wasn’t like them.

Sitting next to Seongjun didn’t suddenly turn him into a delinquent. It didn’t mean he wanted the hallways to turn into a boxing ring.

Seongjun kicked Gyujin’s leg.

Gyujin jolted upright instantly.

“Quit zoning out and looking all fucking depressed.”

Gyujin groaned, folding forward with his head pressed to his knees.
“…it’s not that.”

He straightened again, posture still painfully bad.

“Jihoon talked to me like I’d just agree—like I’d want them to beat Woojae up,” Gyujin said quietly, picking at his fingers.
“I don’t want anyone to get that idea. To think I’m like them.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be near Seongjun. It was the first time he’d realized people might think he was one of his lackeys.

Seongjun clicked his jaw.
“Why do you care what happens to Woojae?”

It wasn’t a question. It was a warning. Gyujin’s fingers stilled.

“…it’s not that I care about him,” Gyujin said softly, eyes fixed on his hands.
“I just don’t want anyone getting hurt because of me.”

Going against what Gyujin half-heartedly expected, Seongjun just snorted, the sound woven into a sharp click of his tongue.
“That’s a fucking lie.”

Gyujin frowned and looked up.
“What?”

Seongjun's smirk widened, sharp and lazy, never touching his eyes.
"Yeah, right. So when are you ordering a gun? The ones that just appear out of nowhere."

"I don't know how to shoot one so—" Gyujin stopped himself and snapped his gaze up.
"Do you *want* me to shoot up the school or something?"

Seongjun shrugged, lazy, like the thought amused him.
"Think it'd be pretty cool."

Gyujin stared at him, lips parting slightly, disbelief written all over his face. Then he scoffed, light and breathless.

"You're so weird…" he muttered.

Seongjun side eyed him and shrugged again, like it meant nothing at all.

★ ☆

The school day finally crawled to an end. Gyujin walked down the wide brick pathway, hands twisting the straps of his bag over and over without thought. The sky had already begun to bleed into evening, pale orange streaked with clouds, the cold seeping through the edges of his sleeves.

He froze mid-step when a familiar figure came into view, already looking at him like he'd been waiting.

Youngdong.

Gyujin raised a hand in a stiff, robotic wave, the motion awkward in a way that only came from too many unspoken words and too much space between them.

Youngdong didn't look any more comfortable than the gesture suggested.

"Uh…" Gyujin hesitated. Fuck, why did this feel so awkward? They hadn't spoken for almost a month, but Youngdong had once been his best friend. He still considered him that, despite everything.

Youngdong pressed his lips together and exhaled sharply, trying to cut through the tension.
"Listen, Gyujin, I'm sorry about—"

"I was never mad at you," Gyujin cut him off, twisting the bag straps tighter into his palms until the knuckles whitened. "I know why you did it. I always understood why you did it, the whole time. I didn't want to push you further if you weren't ready to talk."

Youngdong's eyes went wide, confusion etching deep lines into his face. "You knew…?"

Gyujin nodded, voice tight. Youngdong's confusion only deepened. "If you knew this whole time… why the hell are you still hanging around someone like that bastard?"

Gyujin froze mid-step, jaw tightening, his gaze locked on Youngdong's. "Why are you getting mad at me? What the hell did I do?"

He blinked, slowly, deliberately, as if trying to anchor himself against the anger and frustration coiling in his chest. "What is *'someone like Seongjun,'* Youngdong? What the hell do you know? You're the one who lashed out at me because you couldn't wait to let me explain shit on my own—how is that my fault?" He spat the words, pivoting sharply to push past Youngdong without a glance back.

Youngdong stumbled beside him, mouth opening, eyes wide with incomprehension. "What…? What are you talking about? You said you knew what happened—"

"That's what happened, Youngdong." Gyujin's voice snapped, each word cold and brittle. He froze mid-step, still refusing to meet his childhood friend's gaze. He couldn't. If he did, every fragile hope of reconciliation would crumble.

"I've never resented you for it," he whispered, the quiet almost cruel against the sharp edge of his previous words. "I don't understand why you're mad at me. Just…don't bother."

And he walked away, boots hitting the brick in a rhythm that was too loud, too final. Youngdong called after him, voice cracking, "Gyujin! That's not what happened!" But Gyujin didn't turn.

"Shit…that bastard's keeping him miserable…" Youngdong muttered under his breath, watching the smaller figure recede. He'd have to do something. He had to. Gyujin was his friend. He couldn't leave him like this.

Later, as the day melted into evening, Gyujin sat hunched over his desk, textbooks scattered across the smooth surface. Notes scribbled half-legibly, past papers marked with endless corrections, his eyes scanning the same lines again and again like trying to pull meaning from smoke.

Midterms felt like hell incarnate.

He let out a long, tired sigh and leaned back, stretching. Reaching for his phone, he intended only to take a small break—but his chest constricted when a notification lit up the screen.

One new message. From Youngdong.

[youngdong]
gyujin i have no reason to lie to you about this. I still consider you my friend n all so listen, i didnt decide to do that at all, he's the one who made me punch you. seongjun is lying to you
(5:13 pm)

Gyujin’s hands froze around his phone. The text stared back at him like it carried its own heartbeat.

“That’s true, isn’t it.”

Gyujin lowered his hands to his sides idly and stared into his lap.

Why would Seongjun suddenly change like that? Of course… of course it was a lie.

“Because you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Don’t—I can’t breathe when you’re not here.”

“I could give less of a shit if you did.”

“I told you I don’t care if your little brain’s all messed up.”

“Just don’t disappear.”

All of it was a lie, wasn’t it?

Chapter End Notes

i gave u guys a smit scene bc i was gone so long needed to compensate 💯 used an AOT quote ab abandoning n changing shit here n one from that kdrama called the frog ab the trees.yeah boi ok my twitter is @yaoieugenics im too lazy to do the actual link so lets all js hate russian law instead of me thanks bro shits not my fknnnn fault also if anyone says im using ai on this chapter bitch i will c r a s h the fuck out.. devilish people im telling u...hell sent people... (im joking im not actually upset ab it. there were more nicer than bad ppl. fkn. nonchalant bro ☠️☠️☠️. 🤘 .. 🤘 . 🤘) peace nd love . #blessup also sorry if the formatting was diff i havent written in a while so like. yeah this was 30k words btw. see... i did not betray you all...again i am SORRY RLLY LOL WILL EXPLAIN ON TWT

End Notes

Okay well that's that
My twitter is my user here @yaoieugenics if anyone actually reads this, lmk what you think ha...ill upload the next chapter soon im already writing it i wanted this to be longer but i wrote 2k of the rest high as fuck and wrote actual garbage so i got lazy to redo it so im chopping it into multiple chapters

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!